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**Emergent practices in agile people management**  
**A multiple-case study of SMEs in New Zealand and**  
**Switzerland**

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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

at  
Lincoln University  
by  
Léonie S. Mollet

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Lincoln University  
2021

Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
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**Emergent practices in agile people management:  
A multiple-case study of SMEs in New Zealand and Switzerland**

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Many agile organisations experiment with new approaches to people management. They do so as a response to increasing complexity and a dynamic environment that requires them to abandon previous management practices. In these organisations, hierarchical structures are replaced with self-organisation that relies on empowering every member of the organisation. Consequently, people are no longer seen as a resource that needs to be controlled, but as trustworthy, resourceful, and whole. Instead, their ability to learn and collaborate are the source of future-proofing the organisation. In short, agile organisations can be described as being talent-led instead of being strategy-led. However, this emergent practice is not reflected in theory. In the field of Human Resource Management (HRM), this divide between academic and practitioner interest is a common thread. This research addresses the identified gap between practice and theory in three steps. *Firstly*, it gives an in-depth and rich description of the emergent practice in ten knowledge-intensive SMEs in the service sector. In the absence of best practice approaches due to the dynamic nature of agile organisations, these diverse portraits of reality serve as a welcome illustration. *Secondly*, a cross-case analysis identifies recurring patterns and common themes. *Thirdly*, the insight gathered is integrated into an empirically grounded conceptual framework that frames people management in agile organisations as a social practice – as opposed to a profession in the current HRM paradigm. This practice acts as a driver of business agility: the dynamic capabilities embedded in an organisation’s culture, values and its collective ability. The new framework integrates complexity and tensions instead of omitting them, and describes agile people management as a triadic process where **(1a) core principles** and a general **(1b) approach to people management** are embedded in **(2) practices** surrounded by a fluid **(3) enabling structure**. (1a) The principles circle around enablers of self-organisation, such as transparency, visibility, pragmatism, and diversity. (1b) An agile approach to people management is then characterised by fostering learning, self-reliance and distributed or servant leadership. (2) The core of bringing agile people management to life is the anchoring of principles in everyday interactions (such as recruitment, onboarding, or professional development). Embedded in practices, these principles act as an enabler of autonomy and reproduce the organisational culture and values.

(3) The organisation then wraps itself around practices as a fluid entity that adapts quickly with changing needs. HR work in such an organisation is typically carried out in a network structure, integrated in numerous roles. Consequently, HR work is no longer largely limited to traditional HR functions, but distributed across the organisation – as a shared social practice. As a next step, expanding the new conceptual framework to different sectors or sizes of organisations commends itself. Moreover, investigating the tensions raised in regard to implementing agile people management might also prove fruitful in follow-up research. These tensions include nurturing resilience and self-reliance in the face ambidexterity, enabling visibility in alternative career models, balancing individual and collective needs as well as establishing an open feedback culture. Examining a potential connection between agile people management and an organisation's financial success is another possible branch of research.

**Keywords:** Human Resources Management, HRM, strategic HRM, SHRM, people management, leadership, Agile, agile organisations, business agility, organisational development, learning organisation, self-organisation, social practice, dynamic capabilities



## Preface

In today's world, we are faced with increasing complexity and – as people and organisations – essentially have two options: either to try to reduce and control it, or to embrace it. I am convinced that only the latter will prove rewarding in the long run. Organisations that share this view are repeatedly built around self-organisation and empowerment. Being able to dedicate my research to this very type of organisation that so beautifully aligns with my personal beliefs was an absolute privilege – and equally confronting at times.

At times, it is beyond challenging to tread at the forefront of a relatively young discipline: making sense of practice, establishing connections with existing schools of thoughts, striving to find that golden thread. And then again, this is exactly what drives me. The motivation for this research stems from my passion to make an impact on the here and now, bridging the gap between theory and practice. Consequently, to see how my research was met with interest from both academia and industry was the biggest reward I could have possibly wished for.

Frankly, I could not have succeeded in this endeavour without the support of an amazing group of people. To my family, whānau and friends who helped me to embark on this journey, encouraged me throughout, and provided me with courage and kindness when I could not find it for myself: **thank you from the bottom of my heart!** This includes Josh Reid, who, in true kiwi-manner, will do his very best to brush off every notion of recognition.

I especially would like to thank my marvellous supervisors and mentors Paul Dalziel and Stephanie Kaudela-Baum for their guidance, unwavering support, and braveness in being a part of this adventure between two continents. Equally, I acknowledge my wonderful colleagues and indeed friends at TBF + Partner AG who allow me stay anchored in reality and are continuously willing to experiment, be playful and push boundaries. You have taught me the true meaning of trust, collaboration and being my whole self at work. Thank you for continuously allowing me to grow, and contribute to growing our organisation (and others) in the process.

Lastly, I thank all the inspiring companies that made this research possible by welcoming me with open arms and hearts. In particular, I would like to dedicate this thesis to Norm Comerford, Snapper's former CTO, one of the most inspirational and warm-hearted people I've had the fortune to meet. While he does not witness the publication of this thesis, I am sure he would be proud to see his effort in developing a more human and agile way of managing people reach a wider audience.

I hope you enjoy your reading and find as much inspiration in it as I did!

Léonie S. Mollet, Christchurch, 30 April 2021

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## List of abbreviations

CI / CD	corporate identity / corporate design
DACH	Germany, Austria and Switzerland
dev	development
devs	developer
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
EQ	emotional quotient
HR	human resource
HRM	human resource management
ISO	international organisation for standardisation
KPI	key performance indicator
L&D	learning and development
OKR	objectives and key results
PO	product owner
R&D	research and development
SAFe	scaled agile framework
SHRM	strategic human resource management
SoS	Scrum of Scrums
USP	unique selling proposition
VUCA	volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous

## 1. Introduction

Emergent people management in agile organisations can be understood as a social practice – a perspective that will be illuminated in the course of this thesis. This introductory chapter sets the context, by demonstrating how agile organisations evolved as a response to an increasingly complex environment, and how they experiment with new management approaches, including HR (i.e. human resources). At the same time, this remains largely a phenomenon in practice, with still little academic interest in exploring it.

The overall structure of this thesis therefore aims to gather what is (and is not) included in the existing literature (chapter 2), to **describe** ten cases (in a multiple-case study) comprising the emerging practice (chapter 4), to **analyse** common themes across these cases (chapter 5) and to **synthesise** the themes into an empirically grounded conceptual framework for agile people management (chapter 6), culminating in its visualisation in Figure 27. These steps are all taken based on the chosen research methodology explained in chapter 3.

### 1.1. Agile people management: a phenomenon in practice

Many organisations operate in more dynamic conditions than ever before. As a result, economic principles that were long assumed a given, such as defending a competitive advantage based on efficiency and compliance, suddenly become obsolete. Instead, these organisations need to be able to deliver large-scale customisation in place of mass-production (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 6; Nold & Michel, 2016, pp. 341-342). Consequently, management practices based around satisfying changing customer needs by sensing and reacting swiftly are gaining popularity (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 675; Saha et al., 2017, p. 326). Teece (2017, p. 696) calls these skills around systemic innovation and “doing the right things” the dynamic capabilities of a firm. They can also serve as an explanation for why some organisations outperform others by managing opportunities, resources and transformations better, a phenomenon called firm-level heterogeneity. These capabilities are often idiosyncratic, and hence difficult to replicate in the external market (Teece, 2017, p. 706). In market conditions as outlined above, strong dynamic capabilities within the organisation are deemed crucial for survival (Teece, 2017, p. 712). In reverse, this suggests that investing in dynamic capabilities might strengthen the “strategic infrastructure” of an organisation (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, pp. 10-11). And as the remainder of this chapter will show, people are the key to driving dynamic capabilities.

Organisations with strong dynamic capabilities are called *agile organisations* in current professional practice. They achieve the necessary speed of change by sharing authority and shifting decision-making to the edge of the organisation, where small cross-functional teams are empowered to implement an organisation’s vision (Denning, 2016a, p. 16; Haines et al., 2017, p. 86; Parker et al., 2015, p. 112). Co-creating services with stakeholders, emphasising a clear line of sight to the end customer, and fostering ongoing knowledge-sharing prevent organisational complacency and inertia (Almahamid et al., 2010, pp. 390-391; Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, p. 143; Saha et al., 2017, p. 325; Theriou & Chatzoglou, 2009, p. 616).

From this perspective, firms can no longer be simplified as black boxes that operate on rational criteria, but become “complex organisations that thrive as a result of differentiated human activities” (Teece, 2017, p. 712). Due to their need to maximise innovation, people management practices that foster self-reflection, self-organisation and collaboration become pivotal in agile organisations (Al-Faouri et al., 2014, p. 432; Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 148).

This is only possible if individuals are allowed to follow their own learning paths in dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity (Arnold, 2002, p. 32). However, the current HR paradigm focuses on compliance and efficiency instead, as it is still rooted deeply in the principles of traditional industrial organisations. As a result, many agile organisations are experimenting with new approaches to HR work. *HR work* refers to all organisational processes and practices in regard to people. It is used interchangeably with *people management* throughout this thesis. In contrast to *HRM* (i.e. human resource management), however, the term *people management*

takes a more holistic and inclusive stance, in line with the significance of people-related aspects in agile organisation that will be further illustrated in section 2.3.

While the phenomenon described above can be clearly observed in practice and is met with big interest from an industry-perspective, research activity in this area is still marginal.



## 1.2. Significance of the problem

As the previous section showed, agile frameworks have caught the attention of decision-makers in industry, who are convinced these frameworks are far superior in guiding them through dynamic environments than traditional management frameworks (Denning, 2016b, p. 10; Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008, p. 10; Serrador & Pinto, 2015, p. 1042; Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 448). In line with the changes in general management, HR practice is also transforming. “HR goes Agile”, proclaim Cappelli and Tavis (2018, p. 47) in their article for the Harvard Business Review, reflecting an immense interest of practitioners in the Agile hype. However, they already relativise in the second paragraph that “you could say HR is going ‘agile lite’”, merely applying some general principles, and mostly as a spill over from IT (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018, p. 47).

Whereas practitioners greet the concept with enthusiasm and have an abundance of advice-literature at their hands, the academic literature available is still very fragmented and limited (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 120; Meyer et al., 2017, p. 535). Moreover, the scarce literature has been repeatedly criticised for being uncritical and normative (McSweeney, 2006, p. 25). As such, it is described as “too quick to jump from under-baked theory to cherry-picking evidence” (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 535). McMackin and Heffernan (2020, p. 1) observe that googling the phrase “Agile HR” in 2020 yielded over 161,000 results (66,100,00 for “Agile and HR”), and that most results were linked to consultancies or practitioners. Repeating the same search on Google Scholar resulted in only 148 hits, with most being linked to people management issues when implementing agile methodologies.

### 1.3. Research gap

The current HR paradigm, as will be exemplified in section 2.3, is deeply rooted in the command-and-control structures of hierarchical organisations, aimed at efficiency and predictability. Consequently, there is a distinct misfit between agile organisations, which will be further characterised in section 2.2, and the models proposed by the current HR paradigm to organise HR work. This is amplified by the fact that the majority of HRM research neglects SMEs (i.e. small to medium-sized enterprises) and their specific needs altogether (Buisson et al., 2021, p. 480; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021, p. 5)

The previous section established that agile people management largely remains a phenomenon in practice, and that the existing body of literature in HRM and organisational development does not reflect it. The underlying presumption, in that case, is that agile organisations would benefit from a tailored framework for their HR work. **However, as agile people management is such a recent phenomenon, the issue expands beyond a mere theory gap.** For instance, there is a lack of common language around the emergent practice to be able to effectively illustrate what is happening.

Practitioners cannot learn from good practice in other organisations if it is not accessible and if there is no analysis to provide grounds for further experimentation. The lack of a synthetic framework also prevents practitioners from reasonably talking to each other around advantages and challenges of agile people management – essentially making theory-led practice impossible. On these grounds, the research gap can be defined as tripartite: **The emergent practice needs to be described, analysed and synthesised.** Addressing this gap may not only advance practice, but also close a gap in theory.

#### 1.4. Research objectives and aims

Based on the observation that organisations are experimenting with new approaches to people management, the main focus of this thesis lies on this emerging practice. Specifically, this thesis not only describes and interprets the emerging practice, but also looks for common patterns and recurring themes that lead to the development and proposition of an empirically grounded conceptual framework for people management in agile organisation – as summarised in Table 1 below. In doing so, this research follows a progressive research paradigm and adopts a constructivist stance, manifested in the chosen methodology described in chapter 3.

*Agile HR* in practice is often used to reflect two distinct meanings: *HR for Agile* refers to the designing and implementing of HR strategies to enable business agility. *Agile for HR* describes the application of agile principles to the HR function (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, pp. 1-2). The gap addressed in this study refers to the former. *HR for Agile* is likely to offer a more holistic view on people management in agile organisations, allowing to capture the emergent practice in detail without being restricted to the HR function from a traditional point of view.

Table 1 Research aims and objectives

Research objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Description of the emerging practice regarding HR work in agile organisations</li><li>– Interpretation of the emerging practice against the backdrop of the current HR paradigm</li></ul>
Research aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Identification of common patterns and recurring themes across the emerging practice</li><li>– Synthesis of insights into an empirically grounded conceptual framework for agile people management</li></ul>

## 1.5. Structure of the thesis

In a nutshell, this thesis is structured around the three steps of **describing** (chapter 4) and **analysing** (chapter 5) the emergent practice before **synthesising** (chapter 6) it into a new conceptual framework for agile people management, concluding in Figure 27 (section 6.1.2).

People management that is responding to the needs of agile organisations was identified as a phenomenon in practice in the opening section 1.1. However, this practice is not reflected in the literature yet: there is still a distinct lack of academic activity on the subject, even though agile organisations would benefit from a framework for HR work that is tailored to their needs, a problem that was explained in section 1.2. Addressing this research gap and providing more insight into people management and HR work in agile organisations, as summarised in section 1.3, could expand the existing body of knowledge and support decision-makers in practice alike. As a result, describing and interpreting these emergent practices in agile people management were identified as research objectives in the previous section. Identifying patterns in the emerging practice and synthesising it into an empirically grounded conceptual framework for agile people management conclude the research aims set in section 1.4. The structure of the thesis in this section completes the **introduction** in **chapter 1**.

The emergent practice of agile people management is contextualised in the **literature review** in **chapter 2**, which is divided into three major pillars: Section 2.1 traces back the early days of Agile to a new approach to project management, while section 2.2 then explains how the same principles were increasingly applied to whole organisations. In doing so, these sections establish self-organisation and collaboration in networks as cornerstones of agile organisations, which inherently links them to the concept of learning organisations and emphasises the importance of people management in these organisations. Consequently, the evolution of HR frameworks is explored in section 2.3 and provides a backdrop for recognising the requirements for people management in agile organisations, as summarised in section 2.4.

A multiple-case study allows insight into the rich emergent practice, as explained in the **research methodology** in **chapter 3**. For this purpose, ten organisations on the forefront of agile people management were chosen, which is reflected in the selection criteria in section 3.1. Sections 3.1.1 and 3.1.2 then explain how insight is gathered from the collected data with the help of topic analysis and concept mapping, and how a framework for agile people management is constructed based on both the emergent practice and the existing literature from chapter 2. To ensure this research process is up to rigid standards, section 3.3 elaborates on the quality criteria applied.

The results of the multiple-case study are split into three chapters. *Firstly*, the practices and views around people management in each of the ten organisations studied are represented in the **single case summaries** in **chapter 4**, in a rich and in-depth description. *Secondly*, the **cross-case summary** in **chapter 5** recognises common patterns and recurring themes across all ten

organisations. These findings are organised in four different sections: the core principles of these organisations (section 5.1) provide the foundation for their beliefs on how HR work should be done (section 5.2). In practice, this entails both the ability to embed the chosen agile people management principles in fluid practices (section 5.3) and an enabling organisational structure (section 5.4). *Thirdly*, these results are synthesised into a framework for agile people management that is built around the proposition of HR as a shared social practice, while at the same time emphasising individual responsibility. The development (section 6.1) and validation (section 6.2) of this framework constitute the **discussion** in **chapter 6**. Figure 27 in section 6.1.2 serves as condensed summary of the new conceptual framework.

With the description of the individual cases, the cross-case synthesis and the construction of the framework, this study addresses the research gap outlined in chapter 1. **Chapter 7** therefore closes the loop by referring to the research objectives and aims and providing a summary of the thesis in section 7.1. To complete the **conclusion**, the conducted research is integrated into the existing body of knowledge in HR and organisational development (section 7.2), while identifying areas for further research (section 7.3), such as the expansion to different sectors and thorough testing of the new conceptual framework in practice as well as its potential further development.

## 2. Literature review

This chapter provides the context for the emergence of new people management practices in agile organisations. For this purpose, it is focused on three major strands of literature. *Firstly*, it traces Agile to its beginnings as an alternative approach to project management (section 2.1). Setting the historical context might be helpful in illustrating the drivers and foster an understanding of the characteristics of Agile at large. *Secondly*, it explains business agility as a concept of applying agile values to the whole organisation and establishes connections with organisational theories (section 2.2). *Thirdly*, it portrays the evolution of HRM across the past few decades, summarises the current HR paradigm and contrasts it with the realities of SMEs as well as the principles predominant in business agility (section 2.3).

The first section (2.1) focuses on the **agile framework** itself: its origin in the lean manufacturing ideology of the 1980s and formation in software development practices of the mid-1990s, where it emerged as a counter-thesis to the traditional waterfall-approach to project management. Agile can be viewed as emerging from a bottom-up process, and as a value-based framework rather than a distinct set of tools or methodologies. It is essentially based on the principles of customer collaboration, self-organisation and devolved decision-making, with a strong focus on individuals and interactions (as opposed to strict processes). Agile projects are delivered in small, cross-functional teams with a high degree of autonomy and in an iterative manner. In recent years, Agile has started to raise awareness in general management as well. The sudden interest may have stemmed from the fact that the agile project management approach is aimed at addressing the same challenges that whole organisations face in today's VUCA-world (read: volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous).

The second section (2.2) elaborates on the application of agile values at an **organisational level**. Moving away from static, hierarchical concepts of organisations with rigid command-and-control structures, agile organisations resemble networks rather than closed entities – in the sense of (open) complex adaptive systems that lack simple cause-action-relationships. Such organisations draw on responsiveness, adaptability and structural fluidity in an attempt to increase organisational agility, which is assumed to improve an organisation's ability to sense market opportunities and respond accordingly. These organisations place their human resources at the core and build a learning organisation around empowered, capable individuals, as a way to strengthen their dynamic capabilities and organisational ambidexterity. This section further addresses why agile organisations are often found in the service sector.

The third section (2.3) expands on the **people aspects** of agile organisations. It documents a misfit between the leading HR paradigm (exemplified by the *Ulrich model* that emphasises HR as a strategic business partner – based on a traditional view on organisations) and the dynamic, fluid network structure of agile organisations, including their underlying values. In addition, the section explores why people are the essential drivers of organisational agility and how agile frameworks may promote such behaviour through fostering collaboration,

cooperation and knowledge-sharing. The fourth section (2.4) then introduces the perspective on HRM as a shared social practice and closes the literature review with a **summary** of the requirements agile people management has to fulfil.

## 2.1. Agile project management

### The historical roots of Agile in lean manufacturing

Even though Agile, as we understand it today, is primarily associated with software development, its roots can be traced back to the manufacturing industry – to a time when supply chains started to require “flexibility and nimbleness” to enable quick changes (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 677).

The Toyota Motor Corporation coined the term of *lean manufacturing* in the 1980s, referring to a combination of high quality, low costs and eliminating waste. The latter indicates that everything in a process that does not add value should be removed. The advancement in this system was the combination of just-in-time inventory with a new focus on the human element in the manufacturing process (termed *jidoka* or *automation with a human touch*). The success story of lean manufacturing kept expanding during the following century and greatly influenced the evolvement of quality management and supply chain theories, with *Six Sigma* as a popular model stemming from it (Eltawy & Gallea, 2017, p. 150; Putnik & Putnik, 2012, p. 250). The origin of agility in lean manufacturing illustrates its evolution as a response to a changing environment – aspects which would later lead to the evolution of agile project management in software development (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 677).

### Agile software development: a bottom-up initiative

The emergence of Agile as a new approach to project management commenced in the mid-1990s (Haines et al., 2017, p. 77). Agile software development surfaced in a bottom-up process, when “researchers and practitioners began seeking alternative methods for project implementation, recognising that traditional models for planning and execution may not be optimal or tuned for the specific challenges that projects face” (Serrador & Pinto, 2015, p. 1041). Agile project management subsumes practices that differ greatly from the plan-driven approach known as waterfall approach (Cram & Newell, 2016, p. 156). Thus, it acknowledges the changing dynamics and increasingly complex project environments and incorporates them into project development and execution (Al-Faouri et al., 2014, p. 432).

Since its early days, Agile evolved steadily into the standard in which software is developed. The *Manifesto for Software Development*, often called its founding document, was published in 2001 (Denning, 2016a, p. 15). This online declaration was written by a group of first movers and included a set of guidelines and principles, as shown in Table 2. It is repeatedly quoted as a backdrop against which tools and practices can be evaluated.



Table 2 Agile manifesto

Manifesto for Agile Software Development	Principles behind the Agile Manifesto
<p>We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it. Through this work we have come to value:</p> <p><b>Individuals and interactions over processes and tools</b></p> <p><b>Working software over comprehensive documentation.</b></p> <p><b>Customer collaboration over contract negotiation</b></p> <p><b>Responding to change over following a plan.</b></p> <p>That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more [...]</p>	<p>Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.</p> <p>Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.</p> <p>Deliver working software frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.</p> <p>Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.</p> <p>Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.</p> <p>The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.</p> <p>Working software is the primary measure of progress.</p> <p>Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.</p> <p>Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.</p> <p>Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.</p> <p>The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organising teams.</p> <p>At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behaviour accordingly.</p>

Source: Beck et al. (2001, online)

### Agile project management versus plan-driven (waterfall) project management

Looking at agile project management facilitates an understanding of the underlying principles that also drive agile organisations as a whole.

In contrast to traditional *waterfall* project management methods, agile methods are based on minimal up-front planning and a flexible and iterative process. Customer interaction is maximised, as change is embraced as a given (Cram & Newell, 2016, p. 154; Serrador & Pinto, 2015, p. 1041). In software development, that refers to frequent delivery of increments of working software as an opportunity to gather new feedback from stakeholders – as opposed to delivering a complete product with a fixed scope at the end of the project. To enable this, agile project teams engage in close collaboration across the whole organisation (Misra et al., 2009, p. 1869). Face-to-face communication is understood to be of more value than written documentations. This evolutionary process is presumed to be ultimately more efficient, as it incorporates more flexibility and responsiveness to changing conditions. Planning is not

abandoned, but spread across the whole project cycle instead (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008, p. 13; Serrador & Pinto, 2015, pp. 1041-1042). In short: “[...] the key is not to do more work faster. The key is to work smarter by generating more value from less work” (Denning, 2016a, p. 17).

However, agile project management is not a simple set of tools or instruments that can be implemented by the book, but rather the result of adopting a set of values. In agile literature, this is often reflected by the distinction between “doing agile” and “being agile” (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008, p. 16). This principle is illustrated by Figure 1, where agile values are placed at the tip of the pyramid.



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*Figure 1 Pyramid of agile competences*  
*Source: Kropp and Meier (2015, p. 6)*

Leaders in agile project management are committed to delivery and business value, whereas traditional metrics such as budget, schedule and scope are viewed as secondary. Instead of organising tasks based on mitigating risks regarding time and money, they focus on customer satisfaction (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008, p. 15). Consequently, the shift in focus leads to a different team structure. Agile project management is built around small, self-organising teams that interact with the project on a daily basis and have a maximum of autonomy within broad parameters of control. Instead of organising work directed at optimising predictability and efficiency, these teams focus on continuous improvement and transparency. Overall transparency implies that information accessible at every stage of the project and visible to all stakeholders, thus facilitating the identification of problems at an early stage. In software development, this results in the accumulation of less technical debt (Denning, 2016b, p. 17; Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 449).

At the same time, there is a power shift away from the top and an increased sense of ownership at the frontline interacting with the customer (Birkinshaw, 2018, p. 40). This differs greatly from the command-and-control mindset of bureaucratic organisations whose

organigram often misses the “most important actor – the customer” (Denning, 2016b, p. 13). Ultimately, the goal is to continuously find “ways to generate new value for customers” (Denning, 2016a, p. 17). Agile methods depend upon early and continuous customer involvement, both in establishing goals for the project and providing ongoing feedback as the project moves forward. Thus, the iterative nature of Agile allows for frequent stakeholder interaction and re-scoping project requirements in light of new information or customer requests (Haines et al., 2017, p. 77; Serrador & Pinto, 2015, p. 1042). The incremental delivery of work at the end of each iterative cycle is not viewed as *done* until it is validated from the customer (Denning, 2016a, p. 19).

Projects delivered in agile project management environments are repeatedly reported to score higher in overall project success, efficiency, and stakeholder success – particularly in the high-tech or service industry (Serrador & Pinto, 2015, pp. 1047-1048). On an internal level, practitioners report the most significant benefits from adopting Agile concern “knowledge and learning, employee satisfaction, social skill development, and feedback and confidence” (Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 468).

*Agile* serves as an umbrella term for a family of methods and frameworks such as *Scrum*, *Kanban*, *Extreme Programming* or *Lean* which all share a similar set of underlying values (Denning, 2016b, p. 10). To illustrate this, Table 3 depicts the very similar value sets of two popular agile project management practices. Table 4 summarises the main characteristics of agile project management and contrasts them with a traditional waterfall-approach.

*Table 3 Agile values according to different management practices*

Extreme Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplicity</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Feedback</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Courage</li> </ul>
Scrum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment</li> <li>• Focus</li> <li>• Openness</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Courage</li> </ul>

*Based on: Kropp and Meier (2015, p. 12)*

Table 4 Characteristics of traditional (waterfall) vs. agile project management

	Traditional	Agile
<b>Management style</b>	Command-and-control	Leadership and collaboration
<b>Leadership culture</b>	Command-and-control	Responsive / catalytic
<b>Knowledge management</b>	Explicit	Tacit
<b>Role assignment</b>	Individual / favours specialisation)	Self-organising teams / encourages role interchangeability
<b>Communication</b>	Formal / when necessary	Informal and continuous
<b>Customer involvement</b>	During project analysis	Critical and continuous
<b>Project cycle</b>	Guided by tasks or activities	Guided by product / service features
<b>Project planning</b>	Up-front	Continuous
<b>Development model</b>	Life-cycle model	Evolutionary-delivery model
<b>Documentation</b>	Substantial	Minimal
<b>Organisational structure</b>	Mechanistic / bureaucratic / formalised	Organic / flexible / cooperative
<b>Team location</b>	Predominantly distributed	Predominantly co-located
<b>Team size</b>	Often greater than 10	Usually fewer than 10
<b>Continuous learning</b>	Not frequently encouraged	Integral

Based on: Conboy et al. (2011, p. 49) and Serrador and Pinto (2015, p. 1042)

### Self-organisation at the core of how work is delivered

Small, self-organised and cross-functional teams become a focal point of how work is delivered in agile organisations, confronting HR work with a new tension between individual and collective. Self-organised teams are reported to be better suited for products and services that include customised and innovative products based on building relationships. Self-organised teams are driven by the commitment to fulfil customer needs. They therefore need to be able to organise their work around this goal with a high degree of autonomy, including close interaction with the customer itself. Organisations that are used to hierarchical structures often find it difficult to grant this kind of responsibility and decision-making capability, as it requires changes to existing processes as well as a cultural shift. For example, traditional performance measures and incentives aimed at individual performance fall short in supporting team work (Haines et al., 2017, pp. 79, 86; Parker et al., 2015, pp. 112-113, 122-123).

Several studies have tried to determine the success factors of self-organised teams. Parker et al. (2015, p. 120) summarise their findings as follows: mutual support and trust, commonly shared goals, values and code of conduct, commitment to delighting customers, commitment to feedback and continuous learning, fluid job roles. Agile teams are built around participation,

in the sense that “members decide how their work is done, make suggestions for improvement, set goals, planning, and monitor their performance” (Haines et al., 2017, p. 81). As boundaries between roles blur, a broader skills set is required. The increased social interaction demands well developed social, communication and presentation skills from team members on all levels (Conboy et al., 2011, pp. 51-52, 55-57). This can pose entirely new challenges for recruiting and as well as employee development. The fact that all employees act as a sensor for change opportunities and the high level of collaboration also require all employees to be self-aware and self-reflective (Csar, 2017, p. 157). Some employees may also fear having skills-deficiencies exposed in this changed environment (Conboy et al., 2011, pp. 49-51).

## 2.2. Business agility: Scaling agile principles

Numerous surveys attest to the fact that Agile has become the standard of how software is developed, with a “significant shift from traditional [...] development towards agile approaches” (Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 448). Even though stemming from a project-management perspective, agile frameworks and their claimed benefits soon caught attention outside their initial context. The IT-industry was the first to show a “trend towards adopting agile methodologies in-the-large”, often as an organic spill over from the IT-side of the business (Dikert et al., 2016, p. 87). With a number of companies starting to embrace Agile “not just as an IT methodology but as a way of working” (Birkinshaw, 2018, pp. 39-40). They were drawn to agile principles because they mean embracing uncertainty, improving responsiveness, and establishing a clear line of sight to the customer. Today, both well-established and newly founded companies choose to adopt Agile as a way to organise their whole organisations (Almahamid et al., 2010, p. 387; Denning, 2016a, p. 11).

A survey with nearly 3000 employees and managers in the DACH region (i.e. Germany, Austria and Switzerland) revealed that 68% of managers deem their organisation more agile than their competitor's. However, 70% report not to use any kind of agile methodology (such as Scrum). At the same time, 80% of employees are not able to name a single agile methodology. And only 22% report that project groups span over different departments and functions (Weckmüller et al., 2017, pp. 6-7). While this survey only looks at basic agile methodologies, it serves as an illustration for Agile as a buzzword in today's business world – with a remarkable gap between the dominant narrative and the actual practice.

### But what does *being agile* look like in an organisational context?

Organisations that choose to adopt Agile do so based on “a variety of factors, including the desire to improve efficiency, negative experiences with other development approaches, and pressure from stakeholders to adopt innovative development approaches [...]” (Cram & Newell, 2016, p. 154). Agile project management and its underlying principles seem to be addressing challenges arising in the new economy on a larger scale, where dynamic projects in rapidly changing environments have become the standard – requiring continuous innovation and collaboration (Denning, 2016b, p. 10; Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008, p. 10; Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 448). Moreover, most business activities today are project-based, whether in the public or private sector (Serrador & Pinto, 2015, p. 1040). In short: two decades after the publication of the agile manifesto, general management faces the same challenges that lead to the evolvement of Agile in a project environment (Denning, 2016a, p. 15).

Increasing organisational agility is quoted as the key to enhancing an organisation's performance in the presence of uncertainty and complexity by both practitioners and academics. The common thread in the literature focuses on the purpose of agility: Enhancing an organisations flexibility and adaptability. Thus, agility becomes a measure of an organisation's responsiveness. Consequently, agility refers to both the ability to sense internal

or external stimuli and respective decisions or possible reactions to the stimuli (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 675). These stimuli may come from any place in the network – be it from customers, employees, suppliers, or even competitors (Yang & Liu, 2012, p. 1037). In short, it entails an organisation's "ability to anticipate, sense, and respond" (Saha et al., 2017, p. 326). Agility manifests itself in an organisation's ability to make continuous small adaptations and embrace constant changes (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 342). These changes may be divided into reactive agility (i.e. learning), proactive or offensive agility (i.e. anticipation) and innovative agility (i.e. responsiveness) (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 120; Saha et al., 2017, p. 324).

### Examples of business agility models

Organisational agility seems to be a key concept of enhancing and maintaining organisational performance in the post-industrial age. However, the literature uses a wide range of terms when referring to the capabilities that constitute organisational agility, such as "responsiveness, anticipation, adaptation or reconfiguration, efficiency, flexibility, quickness, innovation, knowledge management, learning" (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 124). Authors often fail to include a precise operational definition of what contributes to organisational agility. The lack of consensus among academics as well as the multidimensional nature of agility complicate these attempts. Various studies have proposed models to close this gap. Some of them are summarised below, chosen based on their foundation on agile values and their integration of systemic views. They are presented in chronological order of publication.

Other models striving to over-simplify agility in attempts to reduce complexity have been excluded, such as the CAMT (*comprehensive agility measurement tool*) (Erande & Verma, 2008, pp. 32-39). It defines business agility as a simple metric value consisting of ten items, such as the number of projects successfully undertaken per year. While models like these might offer a good scaffold to launch interest in agility, they fall short of grasping the complexity of agile organisations. Following the reasoning of renowned sociologist Luhmann (1993, p. 14), as complex social systems, these organisations have long surpassed a level of complexity that can be linearised. Rather than trying to reduce complexity, these organisations should embrace it, resulting in more possibilities for action. Likewise, the vast number of models from consulting and advice literature was consciously excluded as well.

**The agility wheel:** the agility wheel, proposed by Meredith and Francis (2000, p. 139) and elaborated on by Appelbaum et al. (2017, p. 10), identifies four main areas with interdependent components contributing to organisational agility – as shown in Figure 2. It emphasises the network structure of agile organisations (*agile linkages*) and the importance of people as facilitators of a culture of learning and sharing – in an environment with a high degree of autonomy.

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Figure 2 The agility wheel

Source: Meredith and Francis (2000, p. 139)

**Agile levels and practices:** other models also draw on the idea to find common patterns that enhance organisation agility and group them into categories. Charbonnier-Voirin (2011, p. 124), for example, describes four different levels that can contribute to organisational agility, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Four areas of practices enhancing organisational agility

Practices directed towards mastering change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practices implemented to develop the proactivity of the studied entity (capacity of scanning and innovation)</li><li>• Practices aimed at reinforcing team reactivity</li><li>• Capacity of the organisation to communicate its strategic vision</li></ul>
Practices valuing human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Performance evaluation and recognition</li><li>• (Employee participation in decision-making processes)</li><li>• Skills development and knowledge sharing</li><li>• Creativity and continuous improvement</li><li>• Delegation of responsibilities</li></ul>
Cooperative practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Internal cooperation (Facilitation of internal cooperation and teamwork)</li><li>• External cooperation (partnerships between people with different skills)</li></ul>
Practices of value creation for customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Knowledge of customers (Personalizing offering)</li><li>• Anticipate customer's evolutions</li></ul>

Based on: Charbonnier-Voirin (2011, pp. 139-142)



The author consequently proposes a definition of organisational agility based on a literature review and a qualitative study carried out with 22 directors and human resources managers of French companies, tested for validity and reliability using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Her aim is to provide a tool to gauge a company's degree of organisational agility and investigate opportunities to increase it (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, pp. 139-142). Figure 3 brings together the different aspects of organisational agility and how practices are linked with the underlying principles.



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*Figure 3 The characteristics of organisational agility*

*Source: Charbonnier-Voirin (2011, p. 126)*

**Pillars of agility:** Harraf et al. (2015, p. 678) propose a framework based on a literature-review that “is designed to prompt a quantifiable measure of an organisation’s agility”. Their model consists of eleven pillars that support organisational agility (Harraf et al., 2015, pp. 678-684). Table 6 summarises these eleven areas that are thought to improve organisational agility.

Table 6 Pillars of agility

Culture of innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational mindset: constantly evaluating the systems, procedures, teams</li> <li>• Opportunity seeking and alertness: ready to exploit new opportunities</li> </ul>
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devolved power and shared authority</li> </ul>
Tolerance for ambiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making appropriate decisions in the short run to meet long-term objectives</li> </ul>
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistency in approach and function (not only written statement)</li> </ul>
Strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity of direction by establishing a guiding framework for decisions</li> <li>• Balancing decentralisation and speed</li> </ul>
Change management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embracing change as an open-ended, ongoing process that is radical, complex, personal and continuous</li> </ul>
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multi-directional and open communication throughout the organisational</li> <li>• Informal language as an enabler or constraint</li> <li>• Focus on team building (as they are responsible for decision-making and operational success)</li> </ul>
Market analysis and response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools and metrics for external environment analysis</li> <li>• Cooperation and relationship-building within the industry</li> </ul>
Operations management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent and relevant improvement</li> </ul>
Structural fluidity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostering flexibility and creating opportunities for responsiveness</li> <li>• Flat, without boundaries, customer-focused, process-oriented, team-based</li> </ul>
Development of a learning organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging learning of its members</li> <li>• Continuously seeking improvement and transformation</li> <li>• Challenging practices through double-loop learning</li> </ul>

Based on: Harraf et al. (2015, pp. 678-684)

**The performance pyramid:** Nold and Michel (2016, pp. 344-347) portray organisational agility as an interdependent relationship between system, leadership and culture, as depicted in Figure 4. Their model is based on a meta-analysis of case studies involving over 100 organisations, plus survey data from 50 of these organisations. They explain that their model is based on prior models promoting organisational agility. As an expansion, they place people at the heart of their model, explaining that it is “people who power the system by contributing unique skills, expertise, and experience” (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 344). *Culture* is described as the context for knowledge sharing and collaboration, whereas *leadership* engages people on a personal level based on trust. *System* refers to rules, routines and tools to enable leadership. The mutual goal of the three cornerstones is therefore to create an environment that empowers individuals to perform at their highest potential: an environment based on collaboration, a sense of purpose and trusting relationships. In that way, they stay close to the fundamental values of Agile.

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Figure 4 The performance triangle

Source: Nold and Michel (2016, p. 345)

#### Methods based on business agility

In the process, several governance systems for coordinating Agile at large emerged, with SAFe (i.e. *Scaled Agile framework*), SoS (i.e. *Scrum of Scrums*), Sociocracy or Holacracy likely to be some of the better-known. These systems are driven by the goal to embed agile values at an organisational level – by scaling methods used in agile project management (e.g. SAFe or SoS) or creating entire governance systems (e.g. Sociocracy or Holacracy) (Bhandari & Colomo-Palacios, 2019, p. 140; Ebert & Paasivaara, 2007, p. 99; Owen & Buck, 2020, p. 787). The following outline of the governance system drafted by Holacracy serves as an illustration.

With its founder Brian Robertson being a software developer, Holacracy is aptly described as an operation system for organisations. It is based on the principle of heterarchy (described later in this section), shaping organisations around self-organising circles and shared authority instead of static units. These circles are created based on their purpose. The decision-making process, according to roles and responsibilities, are rigidly regulated, with the underlying thought of organising work, rather than people. Standardised procedures allow content-focused discussions with a clear view on organisational goals, based on bringing tensions to the surface as soon as they emerge. As a result, employees no longer have a specific hierarchical position, but assume one or several roles focused on the purpose of the organisation. Decision-making is based on consent: if nothing clearly speaks against a decision, it gets implemented – and can be easily adapted again. The most common critique with Holacracy is its strict system that has the potential to over-simplify social aspects and interpersonal dynamics (Csar, 2017, pp. 155-157).

#### Pointing towards a different kind of organisation

When Agile first started emerging in the software industry, the principal focus was on project management methodology and the immediate working environment of project execution.

However, the underlying values and principles already pointed towards a “concept of an organisation fundamentally different from the traditional management structure” – albeit still largely implicit at that time (Denning, 2016a, pp. 15-16).

Figure 5 depicts an illustration of these two contrasting paradigms of *traditional* organisations (often called *bureaucratic* or *hierarchical*) and their *agile* counterparts (referred to as *post-industrial*, *responsive*, *flexible*, *fluid* or *teal* as well), as two extremes of a continuum.



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Figure 5 The shift from pre-agile to agile mindset  
Source: Denning (2016b, p. 14)

As outlined above, up to this point, organisations were still mainly built around hierarchical structures. These structures are aimed at maintaining a competitive advantage by means of efficiency, compliance and control – assigning people to clearly defined job-descriptions within the organisational chart (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 534). Their design promotes bureaucracy and inertia, while essentially inhibiting change and the prototyping of new ideas. Discretionary competence fixed at the top management level further restricts fast and effective decision-making close to the action, as does concentrating knowledge at a single location in the organisation (Denning, 2016a, p. 16).

Agility, on the other hand, depends on “implicit leadership that facilitates knowledge sharing, seeks consensus, trusts people, delegates more, and provides an environment for people to maximise inherent tacit knowledge” (Nold & Michel, 2016, pp. 342-343). Accordingly, knowledge development and sharing are some of the key challenges. Instead of bureaucracy and compliance, heuristics-based and simple rules foster flexibility. As a result, organisations in a post-industrial environment often favour “flatter hierarchies, decentralised decision-making, greater tolerance for ambiguity, permeable internal and external boundaries, employee empowerment, capacity for renewal, self-organising units, and self-integrating coordination mechanisms” (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 537). Agile organisations thus are built around continuous

learning as an “adapting living organism that is in constant flux to exploit new opportunities and add new value for customers” (Denning, 2016a, p. 16). Section 2.3 will delve further into the new kind of leadership that is needed to facilitate this type of organisation.

Agile organisations are clearly designed around “interpersonal, complex and decentralised customer experience” (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 534). To ensure responsiveness, structures are kept fluid (Birkinshaw, 2018, p. 41). Moreover, “everyone in the organisation has a clear line of sight to the ultimate customer or user and can see how work is adding value to that customer or user – or not” (Denning, 2016a, p. 19). Accordingly, practitioners report strengthened relationships with customers, leading to improved quality as the most essential benefit of Agile (Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 468).

Agile organisations work essentially in network structures, often called “ecosystems of people”, where individuals do not necessarily have to be part of the core organisation and are coordinated horizontally (Denning, 2016b, p. 10). This structure is known as heterarchy, as a juxtaposition to hierarchy, without clear linear direction of power. This does not imply complete absence of power, however, as “heterarchies are instead made up of circular loops of overlapping, and ever-changing, hierarchies” (Fosbrook, 2016, p. 719). Network structures comprise cooperative practices inside and outside the firm and all resources including knowledge, information, collective resources and allies’ endorsements. A superior network structure has been proven to enhance a firm’s performance by allowing organisations to tap into resources through network relationships (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 125; Yang & Liu, 2012, p. 1027).

Decentralisation is another characteristic of agile organisations, where self-organisation and transparent decision-making allow rapid changes – based on small units with high levels of autonomy throughout the organisation (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 542; Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 344). An adaptable, fluid network structure enables redeploying resources to where they are needed, thus constantly reshaping parts of the organisations (Appelbaum et al., 2017, p. 12).

#### **Framing the interest in business agility from an organisational perspective**

The degree of complexity many organisations face on a daily basis has been increasing for decades. The rate of change is influenced by both technological advances and megatrends such as globalisation. The present age is often referred to as post-industrial, due to the shifting ratio of service firms in relation to manufacturing firms (Nold & Michel, 2016, pp. 341-342). American sociologist Daniel Bell predicted as early as 1973 that “business would change from a ‘game against fabricated nature’ (a manufacturing dominant paradigm) to a ‘game between persons’ (a service dominant paradigm)” (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 534). Price as the main element of sustaining a competitive advantage has been surpassed by the imperative for constant innovation and delivering “instant, personalized, frictionless responsiveness at scale” for most firms (Appelbaum et al., 2017, p. 8; Denning, 2016a, p. 15). Today, competitive advantage is often a question of innovation (Jurksiene & Pundziene, 2016, p. 432).

In order to enable customisation and flexibility, an organisation needs to shift its core technology to the boundary of the firm. Most service companies already have their technical core on the boundary, as services are both co-produced with the customer and involve frequent internalizing of market information. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that agile organisations are often found in the service sector (Meyer et al., 2017, pp. 548-550).

However, most companies are still set up for a different economy, namely focusing on ensuring efficiency through hierarchical structures – rather than enabling adaptability or flexibility (Appelbaum et al., 2017, pp. 6-7; Yang & Liu, 2012, p. 1023). They concentrate on maintaining a certain competitive advantage, whereas agile frameworks view constant change as a vital element for survival (Denning, 2016a, p. 18). Even if organisations acknowledge the fact that change is inevitable, there is still a deep disagreement over how organisations should react to extreme volatility. The question remains how organisations may be turned into “highly adaptive, flexible, learning organisations having the skills required to effectively implement strategically driven waves of change and renewal” (Appelbaum et al., 2017, pp. 7-8).

How can these shifts be understood from an organisational theory perspective? This rising interest in business agility as a way to enhance an organisation’s nimbleness may be explained with help of the *capability theory*, as indicated in the introduction section 1.1. As an extension to a resource-based view on companies, capability theory explains how some organisation master the ability of “reconfiguration of existing resources and the creation of new resources” (Jurksiene & Pundziene, 2016, p. 433). Teece (2017, p. 694) uses his theory to describe why some companies thrive in a complex and dynamic environment, while others do not.

Organisations that rely heavily on so-called *ordinary capabilities*, aimed at internal operational efficiency, often struggle for survival. Their competencies may be easily outsourced and are simply less salient in a global market. *Dynamic capabilities*, on the other hand, represent competencies that allow the organisation to sense opportunities, act swiftly, learn and innovate. As opposed to ordinary capabilities, dynamic capabilities are difficult to imitate or create in the first place. (Teece, 2017, pp. 710-712). Deeply embedded in the organisations, dynamic capabilities thus offer a “promising way to explain organizational adaption” (O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2008, p. 188). According to Teece (2017, p. 698), dynamic capabilities can be divided into three clusters of activities: *sensing* (needs, opportunities or threats), *seizing* (through mobilising resources) and *transforming* (as continued renewal and reconfiguration). Jurksiene and Pundziene (2016, p. 432) compare explorational to *radical* and exploitation to *incremental* innovation. Birkinshaw et al. (2016, p. 39) suggest that *sensing* and *seizing* can be understood as being equal to *exploration* and *exploitation*. Following these ideas, *transforming* signifies as a higher-order capability of balancing and coordinating operational actions. Orchestrating these different actions is described as being a part of senior manager roles (O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2008, p. 187).

In a fast-paced environment, organisations need to successfully navigate these three two types of capabilities. Due to their resource poverty, SMEs often struggle with exploiting existing

competencies while simultaneously exploring new possibilities. The ability to continuously manage this tension is referred to as *organisational ambidexterity* (Buisson et al., 2021, p. 480). Integrating ambidexterity into the concept of dynamic capabilities “broadens our understanding of how organizations manage contradicting learning mechanisms and resolve tensions” (Sfirtsis & Moenaert, 2010, pp. 1-2). In particular, organisational ambidexterity can serve as an explanation of how organisations can address tensions around conflicting needs (Birkinshaw et al., 2016, p. 37).

While there are different ways of achieving ambidexterity, *contextual ambidexterity* seems to be the best fit for non-hierarchical, agile organisations. Instead of using sequential or spatial separation, contextual ambidexterity integrates exploration and exploitation within the same organisational units. This simultaneous pursuit corresponds best with the dynamic environment and change these organisations are faced with, by emphasising individuals’ ability to cope with complexity (O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2013, p. 11; Sfirtsis & Moenaert, 2010, p. 5). Looping back to reframing competitive advantage as the speed of innovation, ambidexterity may act as a facilitator: by embracing paradoxes and complexity instead of trying to control them (O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2008, p. 196).

Sfirtsis and Moenaert (2010, p. 10) call ambidexterity a high-order dynamic capability (i.e. resulting in transformation) that defines the boundaries of organisational learning and determine organisational development. Figure 6 shows the integration of the two concepts. Of particular interest are the identified barriers that inhibit resource configuration: *organisational barriers* (e.g. organisational boundaries, contradicting logics), *knowledge-based barriers* (e.g. tacitness of knowledge) and *cognitive barriers* (e.g. plurality of experiences and perspectives that hinder communication and understanding). Overcoming these barriers must be a focal point for organisations striving to be highly transformative.



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Figure 6 Ambidexterity as a high-order dynamic capability  
Source: Sfirtsis and Moenaert (2010, p. 12)

### A systemic view on agile organisations as learning organisations

When looking at the different characteristics of agile organisations above, sharing knowledge, learning and collaborating seem to form a common narrative throughout. This again strengthens the view of agile organisations as being built around fostering dynamic capabilities, which “do not fall like manna from heaven, but rather result from value creation activities, including search, learning, R&D” (Teece, 2017, p. 695). Other organisational theories support this argument of linking agile organisations to adaption and dynamism in the presence of complexity, describing them as *complex adaptive systems* (Meyer et al., 2017, pp. 540-542). (Sfirtsis & Moenaert, 2010, p. 5) describe these systems as comprising “agents (people) who experiment, explore, self-organize, learn and adapt” – inherently making them social systems. Complex adaptive systems are also characterised by absent or only weak causality, meaning that there are now simple “by-the-book” recipes to follow for operation. In systems theory, organisations are viewed as open systems that are embedded in other systems and networks – and therefore have dynamic capabilities. When observing successful agile teams, they tend to show behaviour that is typical in complex social systems: Reliance on emergent practices and sense-making methodologies while tailoring methodologies to specific needs and being mindful to the underlying values and principles, as there are no perfect or ultimate answers to ever-changing questions (Csar, 2017, p. 157; Kropp & Meier, 2015, pp. 15-16). This approach offers a more integrated view on agile organisations and how they operate, and how they depend on social interaction as well. It also explains why agile practices within organisation tend to be continuously altered and customised over time, according to changing needs of people and projects. In such a *modus operandi*, the term *best practice* becomes obsolete. A set of *good practices* might help as a starting point, but a continuous sensing and probing – prototyping while applying sense-making methodology – is how these organisations mature.

As research and development become increasingly important, knowledge expansion and adapting to changes go hand-in-hand (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 676). To manage and navigate “complex networks of resources and relationships” seems to be crucial in such a dynamic environment, where “networking, innovating and globalising” are the key ingredients to incorporate constant change (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, p. 143). The pressure of changing market dynamics and a complex environment is increased by megatrends in society: demographic structures are changing, and paradigms are shifting towards individualisation and meaningful work (Tolchinsky, 2015, p. 46). A number of studies attest to the fact that responsiveness and reactivity are critical to operate in volatile environments (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 675; Saha et al., 2017, p. 324; Yang & Liu, 2012, p. 1023). Some researchers even warn that “refusing to adapt to environmental changes comes at the much higher price of certain failure in the long term” (Appelbaum et al., 2017, p. 7).

Several scholars link organisational agility directly to the concept of organisational learning and human resource strategy focusing on skills, abilities and capabilities (Saha et al., 2017, p. 325). This is founded on the belief that knowledge and innovation drive value creation in the post-industrial age (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, p. 143). A learning organisation embraces



continuous learning as a precondition in a dynamic business environment (Theriou & Chatzoglou, 2009, p. 616). The sharing of knowledge is thus supposed to be a key ingredient of responsiveness, and in close connection to both organisational structure and organisational culture (Almahamid et al., 2010, pp. 390-391).

The importance of knowledge sharing emphasises the value of human resource practices that foster high levels of autonomy and responsibility, as individuals across the organisation collect stimuli in constant interaction with other network partners (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 125). Only when these individuals have the knowledge, skills and abilities to make fast and sensible decisions (and are empowered to do so), can an organisation become responsive (Saha et al., 2017, p. 325). Conditions that inhibit the “free flow of knowledge between people throughout the organisation” prevent optimal usage of knowledge (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 346). Aspects such as “continuous learning, teamwork, participation and flexibility”, all related to what we would hitherto describe as *HR policies*, are reported to facilitate such behaviour (Theriou & Chatzoglou, 2009, p. 617).

#### Maturity stages and challenges in agile transformations

Section 1.2 mentioned the difference between *doing* agile and *being* agile; whether an organisation merely adopts a certain vocabulary or techniques, or truly incorporates agile values and principles (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008, p. 16). Werder and Maedche (2018, p. 10) reflect this divide by distinguishing between different stages of maturity between agile organisations, i.e. (1) starting the transition towards agility, (2) being in full transformation, and (3) being more mature. The latter can be defined as having fully embraced and incorporated agile principles.

The challenges outlined in section 2.1 about the adoption of agile project management are magnified in an organisational context: the adoption of Agile requires commitment to change well beyond mere tools and techniques. When Agile moves beyond project management practices, organisations have to deal with inter-team coordination and interactions with other organisational units and functions (Dikert et al., 2016, p. 88). In fact, it touches every layer of the organisation, including mindset, values, culture, structure, processes and how work is divided into roles itself (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, p. 3). As mentioned in the paragraphs above, the dynamic nature of agile organisations prevents the formulation of a best practice approach. Organisational agility thus becomes “more a matter of becoming than being” (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 675). As a consequence, “by-the-book” adoptions of Agile are hardly feasible (Cram & Newell, 2016, p. 154). The transformation of an existing organisation is further complicated by the nature of the change, as it is more than just the implementation of processes. It involves every part of the organisation, on an operational as well as cultural level. Rethinking the whole organisational structure, well-established and deeply embedded management practices and internal silos is a must – in order to align the whole organisation (Appelbaum et al., 2017, p. 10; Harraf et al., 2015, p. 676; Solinski & Petersen, 2016, p. 449).

Whereas classic management philosophy “fixes” organisation through rigid reengineering, agile transformations are more concerned with introducing a different mindset than a given set of tools (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 352). The organisational transformation can rather be described as “a matter of learning by doing – with constant inspection, adaptation and reflection” (Denning, 2016b, p. 15). This requires a buy-in from all stakeholders, including managerial roles that might have issues with the surrendering of power and status within the new framework (Misra et al., 2009, pp. 1879-1880).

The successful transformation of an organisation starts with a clear mission, vision and set of values that are a part of continuous communication. Without a shared purpose and commitment, transformations are bound to fail (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 344). Awareness and commitment for agile values by all stakeholders is essential, while granting autonomy to continuously tailor methods to specific needs (Pikkarainen et al., 2012, pp. 694-695). To include agile principles in these values is therefore critical. A study on success factors of agile teams across eight companies has shown that successful teams agree on the fact that Agile is not a matter of instruments and tools, but “a change of the culture in an organisation” (Kropp & Meier, 2015, p. 12). Agile as such is a different way of understanding and acting, not something that can be formalised in an operating manual (Denning, 2016b, p. 13). In the same way, technology (e.g. new software) can only ever act as an enabler, not as a driver of change (Denning, 2016a, p. 17). The importance of investment in training and coaching accompanying any kind of transformation can therefore not be stressed enough. Only when practices are carried out with a deeper understanding of their purpose can they be customised adapted in a meaningful way (Dikert et al., 2016, pp. 96-97).

When agile methods are implemented alongside traditional methods without aligning the whole organisation, two different value sets are bound to clash (e.g. unclear expectation or contrasting management styles) (Cram & Newell, 2016, p. 156). A study conducted by the German branch of the recruiting agency Hays discussed the state of agility in knowledge intensive firms with 226 managers. First and foremost, it revealed a large amount of tension between traditional structures and agile organisation units. Two thirds of managers stressed that they would rather drive efficiency than agility. Only 24% saw using employees’ individual potentials as a priority, and a meagre 17% wanted to increase team autonomy. The explanation quickly followed: 61% of managers deemed it difficult to change their own leadership style, and struggled with juggling line management and project management duties (Schabel, 2018, pp. 8-9).

A survey with 1800 employees in the DACH region (in companies with more than 100 employees) might deliver the answer to many implementation challenges: only 8% of employees believe that a lack of tools and technologies is to blame for unsuccessful change. The vast majority is convinced that change usually fails due to the human element and resulting cultural facets (Weckmüller et al., 2017, p. 8).

### 2.3. The current HRM paradigm versus agile requirements

Throughout the previous sections, the people management and leadership kept resurfacing as both core drivers and challenges of establishing an agile work environment. The current section therefore takes a closer look at the most popular HRM framework today and how it evolved – including its challenges to meet the needs of agile organisations.

Before venturing into the past, it is vital to answer the following question: what is included in *HR work* anyway? Heilmann et al. (2020, pp. 1295-1296) conclude that HR work comprises an extensive range of topics, such as “organisational design, workforce planning, recruitment, selection, placement, commitment, loyalty, contract termination, employee engagement, performance management, leadership, managing attendance and absence, change and development, performance management, knowledge management, career management, motivation, compensation, benefits and services, organisational/employee learning, work time control, information sharing, equality, diversity management, discipline, rewards, talent management, ethics, labour relations, corporate social responsibility, IT in HR, health and well-being, the work–life balance, downsizing, flexibility, communication, and global HRM”. While some aspects stem from legal requirements, others emanate from organisational needs. Hence, these practices might not all be equally covered in all organisations, and especially SMEs often bundle them, putting more emphasis on some areas than others.

Similar to the maturity model mentioned in the previous section 2.2, Denning (2018, pp. 3-7) divides organisations pursuing business agility into three groups:

- Organisations relying on **traditional HR**, where employees are seen as a resource and both structure and processes are aimed at creating efficiency.
- An approach nicknamed **agile-lite HR**, where initial process improvements are visible and agile principles are being explored (e.g. investing in manager’s coaching skills or introducing more frequent performance assessments).
- The most mature stage of HR described as **Agile talent management**, because it focuses on employees being able to unleash their full potential.

*Traditional HR* corresponds with the current HR paradigm depicted in the first half of this section. The implications of the most mature stage (i.e. *Agile talent management*) and what such an approach to HR might entail is addressed in the second half of this section.

#### Evolution of the HR business partner model

A look back at how the current HRM paradigm evolved also reveals why it falls short in addressing the needs of agile organisations. The shift from manufacturing to service economy put people in the spot-light, and strategic HRM accordingly. In the 1980s, the concept of the relationship between the management of people and their performance started developing (Saha et al., 2017, p. 327). HR grew into a function ensuring the “creation of essential

organisational capabilities” (Lemmergaard, 2009, p. 183). This was met with great interest from practitioners, who were keen to move past their reputation as day-to-day administrators and overcome their low status as designated by senior management (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, p. 3). This “marginalisation of the personnel function” was linked to the fact that it dealt with soft human factors, as opposed to the hard facts line managers were faced with (Wright, 2008, p. 1067).

HR managers were thus confronted with expectations to adopt a more strategic approach to people management. However, this shift in practitioner interest was not replicated in academia. Whereas many studies investigated the relationship between HRM intervention and a firm’s success, there were hardly any contributions to translating this new approach to practice. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that the model portrayed in the next paragraph was received with open arms (Gerpott, 2015, p. 215).

In the mid-1990s, Conner and Ulrich proposed a framework dividing the HR function into four distinct roles, labelling HR as a “business partner” along the two axes of *strategy versus operations* and *process versus people* (Conner & Ulrich, 1996). The four emerging key roles are summarised in Table 7. It is still one of the most cited and widely used models among HR academics and practitioners today, despite continuous scepticism regarding its validity or effectiveness – again proof for the divergence between research and practice (Lemmergaard, 2009, p. 185; McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, p. 2).

Table 7 Business partner for HRM and its four roles

Partner in strategy execution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on designing processes that help achieve an organisation’s goals</li> </ul>
Administrative expert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functional expert that ensures processes such as staffing and training are carried out efficiently and effectively (considering employees as costs)</li> </ul>
Employee champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing employee’s commitment and capabilities, tending to employee well-being and the psychological contract between company and employee</li> </ul>
Change agent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing transformation and change</li> </ul>

Based on: Lemmergaard (2009, pp. 183-185)

Ulrich and Beatty offered an updated version of the model in 2001, including six roles instead of four (i.e. *coach, architect, builder, facilitator, leader, and conscience*) – again with the requirement that successful HR departments master all of these roles simultaneously. In 2005, the model was again overhauled (by Ulrich and Brockbank) with the addition of a HR leader role (Lemmergaard, 2009, pp. 185, 188). In 2012, another version of the model followed, this time indicating six competencies (instead of roles), as shown in Table 8 (Ulrich et al., 2012, pp. 51-54).

Table 8 Extended business partner model alongside six competencies

Credible activist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results-based integrity and high interpersonal skills</li> </ul>
Strategic positioner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of global business context, industry and market dynamics, which allows to develop business strategies (and annual plans and goals)</li> </ul>
Capability builder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Auditing and orchestrating an organisation's capabilities</li> </ul>
Change champion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shaping effective change processes and structures</li> </ul>
Human resource innovator and integrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritising desired business results and aligning HR practices, processes, structures and procedures (with discipline and consistency)</li> </ul>
Technology proponent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applying social networking technology to increase connectedness and increasing their role in the management of information</li> </ul>

Based on: Ulrich et al. (2012, pp. 51-54)

The latest model acknowledges the importance of stakeholders and demands that HR stays connected with the business-side. However, there is still a strong sense of centralised planning, e.g. that HR has to be “a strategic positioner who not only knows the business but can shape and position the business for success” (Ulrich et al., 2012, p. 22). There is a strong emphasis on hierarchy (i.e. employees vs. company and different silos). Despite offering various overhauls themselves, Ulrich and colleagues question the successful transformation of the profession in an article in 2013. The opening paragraph reminds more of a self-help book than a scholarly article, wanting to help HR professionals “plagued by self-doubt, repeatedly re-exploring HR’s role, value, value, and competencies” (Ulrich et al., 2013, p. 457). Another article a few years later again compared HR to standing at a crossroad, echoing HR’s preoccupation with itself (Ulrich, 2016, p. 148).

To fulfil the requirements of what shall be referred to as the *Ulrich model* in this thesis henceforth, many practitioners rely on structuring the HR function into three groups: (1) delivering administrative tasks through a *shared service centre*, (2) strategic HR *business partners* supporting senior management and business units, and (3) *centres of expertise* stocked with experts (e.g. on recruitment or change management) providing advice for the service centre and the business partners. This is the most common interpretation of the model, due to its trichotomy often labelled the “three-legged stool model” (Gerpott, 2015, p. 216; Wright, 2008, p. 1068).

Various authors proposed extensions to the *Ulrich model*, predominantly in publications close to practitioners, such as consulting or advice literature. Vosburgh (2007, p. 12), for instance, warns that “if we do not step forward with compelling HR leadership, the future will be determined for us”. To battle the risk of “continued marginalisation”, he proposes that HR has to fully adopt its role as an internal consultancy in order to regain respect from senior management – while outsourcing all transactional tasks as far as possible (Vosburgh, 2007, p. 13). Olesch (2011, p. 59) plea to relabel the *business partner* into a *steering partner* also reflects the need of practitioners to prove their own relevance. It is followed by stressing that

HR managers should gain knowledge in sales, marketing, finances and organisational development as well, in order to be taken serious in discussions – apparently presuming, that HR managers had no grasp of the business-side previously. Wach (2019, p. 12) proposes to expand the business partner model with an entrepreneurial component, reflecting that innovation is needed to meet current challenges. For that, he introduces four additional roles and essentially increases overall organisational complexity, despite acknowledging that the existing business partner model already can overload the HR function.

Regardless of which version or alteration, approaches to HR work that are in line with the *Ulrich model* still reproduce the underlying assumption that people are a resource that ought to be optimised. Following this narrative, organisations are strategy-led constructs and people remain a part of ordinary capabilities, as discussed in section 2.2 (Teece, 2017, p. 696). The role of HRM in this context is ensuring efficiency, mitigating risks and executing strategies from higher up. In the best-case scenario, HRM may act as an influencer, yet is largely dependent on organisational politics and management patronage.

The numerous versions and extensions by Ulrich and colleagues lead many scholars to doubt its theoretical foundation and sufficiency in addressing the dynamic reality (Gerpott, 2015, p. 216). Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015, p. 191) address this criticism by stating that the changing business environment demands adapting of the HR function – essentially admitting that the model barely copes with the increasing complexity. Gerpott (2015, pp. 217-218) goes as far as declaring the widespread adoption of the *Ulrich model* is “not in line with an evidence-based approach to management”, pointing out the missing link between implementation of the model and organisational success especially. In the same article, she illustrates that the model falls short in resolving central tensions of HRM in the long-term. These include, for example, tensions between being an employee advocate and a representative for the organisation (i.e. identity tension) or tensions between different stakeholder expectations (i.e. performance tension). Gerpott concludes that the *Ulrich model* simply avoids these tensions by spatial separation instead of acknowledging and integrating it. By doing so, it fails to include ambidexterity, as urged for by Sfirtsis and Moenaert (2010, p. 6), who accuse managers of repeatedly preferring “simple and uni-dimensional concepts based on logical and internally consistent sets of abstractions oversimplifying the actual reality”.

Regardless of ongoing criticism, Ulrich and colleagues state that “the HR profession has arrived. The lingering self-doubts can and should be replaced with self-confidence”, including that HR meets the criteria of a profession (e.g. governing body, certification and training, independence and recognition) (Ulrich et al., 2013, p. 468). Others argue that while implementing the model might succeed in boosting individual HR managers’ self-esteem, it does not contribute to a broader *professionalisation*. Wright (2008, p. 1065) even declares that the *Ulrich model* furthered the bifurcation between transactional and strategic aspects of HR work, encouraging competition instead of social recognition. This criticism expands to the seeming “fragmentation of HR” caused by the three-legged model, which is often emphasised

by an “off the shelf” introduction of the *Ulrich model* without taking specific organisational needs into consideration – hoping that imitating a structure will automatically result in delivering value (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, pp. 7-8).

### The challenges of HRM in SMEs

Whereas such a mechanical implementation might be more pronounced in larger organisations that can afford such a distinct structure, traditional HRM models leave an imprint on how SMEs operate as well. Whereas guidance for theory-led practice in strategic HRM is limited in general, SMEs are almost neglected entirely (Buisson et al., 2021, p. 480; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021, p. 5). The available knowledge is “highly descriptive and fragmented and yields no theoretically supported guidelines for SMEs”, according to Brand and Bax (2002, p. 460). Despite a consensus that human resource management is crucial for SME performance (Brand & Bax, 2002, p. 451; Harney & Nolan, 2014, p. 153). Making up the majority of workplaces in many developed countries, SMEs are often called drivers of economic growth in the private sector. Despite this attribution, little existing HRM research focuses on SMEs (Harney & Dundon, 2006, p. 49; Heilmann et al., 2020, p. 1292). This is surprising, especially considering the challenges SMEs are faced with regarding the scarcity of resources, the lack of economies of scale and the weight of every single employee – in particular for companies whose business model is directly impacted by people (Bacon & Hoque, 2005, p. 1978; Brand & Bax, 2002, p. 451).

There is still an “implicit assumption” that models developed for larger organisations can simply be applied to SMEs, resulting in what can be labelled “little big business syndrome” (Harney & Dundon, 2006, p. 49). This point of view obviates that SMEs are “complex and heterogeneous organisations” (Harney & Nolan, 2014, p. 156). As a result, their practices can vary greatly, yet are often informal (Bacon & Hoque, 2005, p. 1976; Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021, p. 14). When granting SME’s their uniqueness, informality cannot be mistaken as an indicator for low HRM performance (Harney & Dundon, 2006, pp. 49, 69). The lack of bureaucracy might even contribute to SMEs’ ability to change quickly with emerging needs (Brand & Bax, 2002, p. 452). HRM in SMEs is also significantly impacted by leaders, due to their social and organisational structure (Buisson et al., 2021, p. 481; Harney & Nolan, 2014, p. 158). With these characteristics, SMEs are already used to managing tensions that are typical for agile organisations, which will be further exemplified in the remainder of this section.

### People as drivers of dynamic capabilities in agile organisations

The criticism stated earlier implies that a traditional approach to HRM might not be the best fit neither for SMEs nor for agile organisations in general. The struggle to be a unified professional body at all costs contradicts the customer-centricity and structural fluidity of agile organisations, as summarised in the section 2.2. Emerging research also observes a diminishing of siloed staff functions, such as HR (Laloux, 2014, p. 71). HR *competencies*, on the other hand, are still in high demand. The question remains how they can be integrated into agile organisations in a genuine way. However, the role of HR in value creation is rarely addressed,



compared to factors such as finances or other scarce resources that limit an organisation's capabilities (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, p. 143). And similar to the lack of scholarly interest in practice-relevant strategic HRM that led to the sustained popularity of the *Ulrich model*, there is a "science-practice divide" regarding Agile and HR (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, p. 11).

Recently, even Ulrich and Yeung (2019, p. 161) jumped on the bandwagon, linking organisational agility to HR tools, while yet again using it as a new justification for boosting the HR *profession*. However, agile work environments differ greatly from those in traditional hierarchical organisations the *Ulrich model* draws on, and it is important to acknowledge their differences (Conboy et al., 2011, p. 48). In such an environment, HRM itself will essentially have to reshape itself as a driver of agility (Saha et al., 2017, p. 326). HRM takes the centre stage for designing and running agile organisations – but might be organised completely different than traditional HR departments (Al-Faouri et al., 2014, p. 435).

At this point, it might be helpful to remember how McMackin and Heffernan (2020, pp. 1-2) distinguish between *HR for Agile* and *Agile for HR* (as mentioned in section 1.4). The exposition in this section focuses on the former, looking past the narrow focus on existing HR roles to people as a dynamic capability in agile organisations – and what that might imply for the HR roles in return.

The previous chapters have established that an organisation's "capacity of transformation and innovation" depends essentially on people (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011, p. 148). Without an agile workforce, organisations cannot be agile (Al-Faouri et al., 2014, p. 432). An agile workforce might be defined as dynamic talent applying the right skills at the right place and time, and according to current organisational needs (Heilmann et al., 2020, p. 1296). This is particularly important in service-firms and network-based business models with a high degree of customisation and stakeholder interaction, where aspects such as relationship-building, creativity, knowledge and flexibility knowledge have become the "backbone of industrial competitiveness" (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, pp. 145-146). Since knowledge-sharing and collaboration as drivers of agility all reside in the human capital, the traditional power balance has shifted: People are not assets that can be directly owned or controlled by an organisation (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 541).

Al-Faouri et al. (2014, pp. 434-435) summarise the characteristics of an agile workforce as shown in Table 9 emphasising the attitude towards learning, self-development and problem-solving and change.



Table 9 Characteristics of an agile workforce

Proactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiative-taking and opportunity-seeking personality</li> <li>• Anticipating change-related problems and suggesting suitable solutions</li> </ul>
Adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to adapt quickly to unanticipated changes</li> <li>• Learning to be responsive to new market demands</li> </ul>
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to function efficiently under stress against a changing environment</li> </ul>

Based on: Al-Faouri et al. (2014, pp. 434-435)

### The link between dynamic capabilities, collaboration and knowledge-sharing

In section 2.2, agile organisations were compared with learning organisations. Again circling back to the capability framework, while traditional HR focusses on technical efficiency and hence ordinary capabilities, agile organisation require people management practices that drive evolutionary fitness – or in short: doing the right things. Dynamic capabilities can be divided into three groups of activities: (1) *sensing* opportunities, (2) mobilising the resources needed for *seizing* these opportunities and (3) continuous *transformation*.

A quantitative study by Rauch and Hatak (2016, p. 487), that aggregates empirical findings on the relationship between HR-enhancing practices and SME performance, attests that skill-, motivation-, and empowerment-enhancing practices have a positive impact on an organisation's performance. Knowledge is often called the workhorse of the new economy (Al-Faouri et al., 2014, p. 432). However, strategy in agile organisations is all about “sensing and seizing new opportunities” and no longer about planning ahead for a predictable future by conservating existing knowledge (Denning, 2018, p. 3). Especially in service-oriented firms, this process heavily relies on knowledge workers and experts that are constantly learning and openly sharing knowledge (Teece, 2017, p. 698; Theriou & Chatzoglou, 2009, p. 638). Because this action depends on empowered people, agile organisations move from being *strategy-led* to being *talent-led*.

Interactions and relationships among individuals in these networks are presumed to play a vital role in the value creation through sharing knowledge and competencies (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, p. 157). The emerging literature describes agile organisations as people-centric, “blending culture, leadership, and systems in a way to maximise knowledge flow throughout the organisation to develop dynamic capabilities and facilitate effective and timely decision making” (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 353). As a first of its kind, a qualitative study investigated what 100 Finnish SMEs deem *agile* HRM practices and clustered them into eleven themes. *Collaboration* was one of the most frequently mentioned topics, reflecting that culture of exploration and co-creation. Another cluster reflected the importance of *well-being* in the workplace, indicating a more holistic view on employees (Heilmann et al., 2020, p. 1298).

Contributing to the learning organisation and investing in a shared purpose and organisational commitment are therefore likely to be a main pillar of HRM practices increasing organisational

agility. Considering that knowledge bases are expanding while the value period for a particular piece of knowledge decreases, these practices gain momentum. In such circumstances, the human ability to think across disciplines, innovate and create takes on greater significance (Abbatiello et al., 2018, p. 41; Theriou & Chatzoglou, 2009, p. 616). Therefore, competencies around self-reflection, tapping into new sources and questioning existing knowledge or behavioural patterns take precedence over the ability to reproduce factual knowledge (Arnold, 2021, p. 168).

The solution is to build agile organisational memory systems “that can be easily reconfigured, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (Al-Faouri et al., 2014, p. 434). Organisational culture is quoted as providing the framework that can impede or foster collaboration, problem-solving and knowledge-sharing across the whole organisation. In this context, employees rely on tools that enable decentralised access to rich, current data and information, as well as an open, bottom-up approach to participation and collaboration (Azeem & Yasmin, 2016, p. 629; Tolchinsky, 2015, p. 52).

Whereas hierarchical organisations rely on linear employer-employee relationships, in agile organisations we can observe the “emergence of a diverse workforce ecosystem” with different ways of sourcing talent (Abbatiello et al., 2018, p. 25). This goes hand in hand with a new concept of career built around individuals, where linear job-based pathways are being replaced by empowering individuals to construct their own path with diverse experiences and roles. The challenge of such a diverse network lies in engaging them in relationships both inside the organisation and spanning beyond it (Nielsen & Montemari, 2012, p. 143). Under such circumstances, the focus of HRM shifts from individual employees to networks of people (Azeem & Yasmin, 2016, p. 687). These “interpersonal, cross-functional and organisation-spanning relationships are critical elements of the agility paradigm” (Appelbaum et al., 2017, p. 12). Dynamic capabilities thus exist in leaders, but also in an “organisation’s values, culture and collective ability” (Teece, 2017, p. 698).

#### Demand for a different kind of leadership

Current management practice still clings to the ideal of the manager as a powerful (and isolated) decision-maker (Kissel & Mikus, 2016, p. 37). It soon becomes evident that hierarchical structures and leadership “are limited in how they deal with increasingly complex issues” (Zeier et al., 2018, p. 1). Leadership in hierarchical organisational is often described as breaking down tasks to establish predictability and stability, which contradicts the principle of self-organising, autonomous teams (Parker et al., 2015, p. 117). In an agile context, being a leader might sometimes mean not doing anything and all or simply guiding others by asking questions, granting them the freedom to explore and make their own experiences (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 322).

According to agile frameworks, leaders need to move beyond Agile as a way to simply increase speed, and see it as a way of creating a learning organisation (Appelbaum et al., 2017, p. 12).

Only by building organisations around human needs and values can people live up to their full potential and creativity, engaging in acquiring and sharing knowledge as communities of action (Nold & Michel, 2016, p. 343; Tolchinsky, 2015, p. 60). This entails the ability to accept uncertainty, ambiguity and a low power distance. In such an environment, leaders provide guidance (e.g. regarding values or the organisation's vision) and remove impediments (Haines et al., 2017, p. 79; Parker et al., 2015, p. 124). While current management practices still emphasise "learning from the past", agile leadership is guided by possibilities and future opportunities (Arnold, 2021, p. 11).

A cornerstone of Agile is an inherent trust in the intrinsic motivation and capabilities of the individuals doing the work, performing what is necessary to delight customers (Denning, 2016b, p. 13). It is believed that "skilled professionals do not take well to micromanagement" (Parker et al., 2015, p. 119). Leaders hence need to balance autonomy and freedom with alignment with vision, principles and values, while continuously interacting with a dynamic environment (Birkinshaw, 2018, p. 41; Denning, 2016b, p. 14; Tolchinsky, 2015, p. 57). With this in mind, agile leadership builds on a constant loop of self-observation and self-reflection, to ensure individuals constantly evolve and unlock new potential – acknowledging that they themselves are their main limiting factor (Arnold, 2021, pp. 8-10). Thus, it transcends traditional line management, instead embracing "a spontaneous, collaborative, and intuitive form of leading that emerges as a shared role of practitioners" and becomes part of the organisational doing (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 322).

## 2.4. Literature summary

As the introductory chapter 1 showed, the current literature has not talked about HRM in an agile context. The *Ulrich model*, discussed in the previous section 2.3, served as an illustration of traditional HRM literature and its persistent focus on industrial organisations. Consequently, this literature review has focused on concepts relevant to developing a framework to address this gap. These insights can be summarised under three headings: a **(1) working definition of agile organisations** at large, framing **(2) agile people management as shared social practice**, and the consequential **(3) requirements for agile people management**.

### (1) Working definition of agile organisations

In a nutshell, the emergent literature in section 2.2 identified a new type of organisation, built for incorporating continuous change by driving dynamic capabilities. Drawing on the common core of the emergent literature, Table 10 integrates the characteristics for agile organisations into a working definition that is used in the remainder of this study, mainly to identify agile organisations for the case selection in section 3.1.1.

*Table 10 Characteristics of an agile organisation*

Cultural dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Value-driven</li><li>• Embracing change as an open-ended process</li></ul>
Structural dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Customer-focused</li><li>• Maximising collaboration and knowledge-sharing</li><li>• Structural fluidity</li><li>• Self-organising, small teams with high degree of autonomy</li><li>• Shared authority and devolved decision-making</li><li>• Ensuring transparency and open access to rich data</li></ul>

### (2) Agile people management as a shared social practice

The previous sections have shown that a singular perspective on HRM as an isolated profession cannot grasp the complexity of agile organisations. Looking at people management through the lens of social practices offers an alternative view that may be better suited to their reality – and is compatible with the concept of dynamic capabilities outlined earlier. Social practices can be described as routines and can include body, mind and objects. In a work environment, social practices might guide the way we collaborate, recruit or provide feedback – a common way of understanding and acting. Thus, practices can set the stage for coordinating group behaviour (Haslanger, 2018, p. 245). As such, social practices go beyond normative compliance structures known from traditional HR, but are “embedded in collective cognitive and symbolic structures” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 245). Essentially, they are “forms of working and living, provide meaning and direction, afford safety and routine, engender collective standards” (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 319). Practices can be intentional and rule-governed (e.g. the process of recruiting) or stem from a shared culture internalised through socialisation (e.g. how we welcome a new colleague into our team) (Haslanger, 2018, p. 235).

Because individuals act as carriers of a practice, they tend to be stable and are conserved by reproducing them (Haslanger, 2018, p. 245; Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Different practices may also coexist and compete for scarce resources. This might serve as an explanation for resistance to change, for example the reluctance of line managers to adapt their own leadership style (that in itself consists of numerous layers of stable social practices). In such instances where people feel threatened by change, an organisation “may influence social practices by providing encouraging support and the necessary resources and by putting pressure on social practices for adaptation and reform” (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 320). Practices also influence each other, by allowing to apply lessons learned in a different context. Practices can thus act as a cultural tool (Haslanger, 2018, p. 242). However, this requires a conscious effort of making social practices explicit by communication and transparency. Distributed leadership plays a crucial part in questioning, integrating and balancing different social practices. A shared social identity then allows a collective “meaning-making in and around work”, hence “constantly (re-)negotiating” between stability and change (Geilinger et al., 2016, pp. 320-321). Leaving the desire for a unified profession behind, looking at HRM through the lens of a *shared social practice* might provide an alternative framework for researchers that are interested in analysing social phenomena in every-day life (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 258).

Consequently, *reframing HR work as a shared social practice* carries the opportunity for balancing organisational change and stability by sense-making and distributed leadership. From that perspective, HR work may serve as a curator of organisational culture that can counteract fragmentation in a highly dynamic environment. It also offers a view on HRM that is not restricted to traditional HR role holders, but might include leaders or indeed employees across the organisation. Figure 7 illustrates the connection between social practices, individuals and organisational routines.

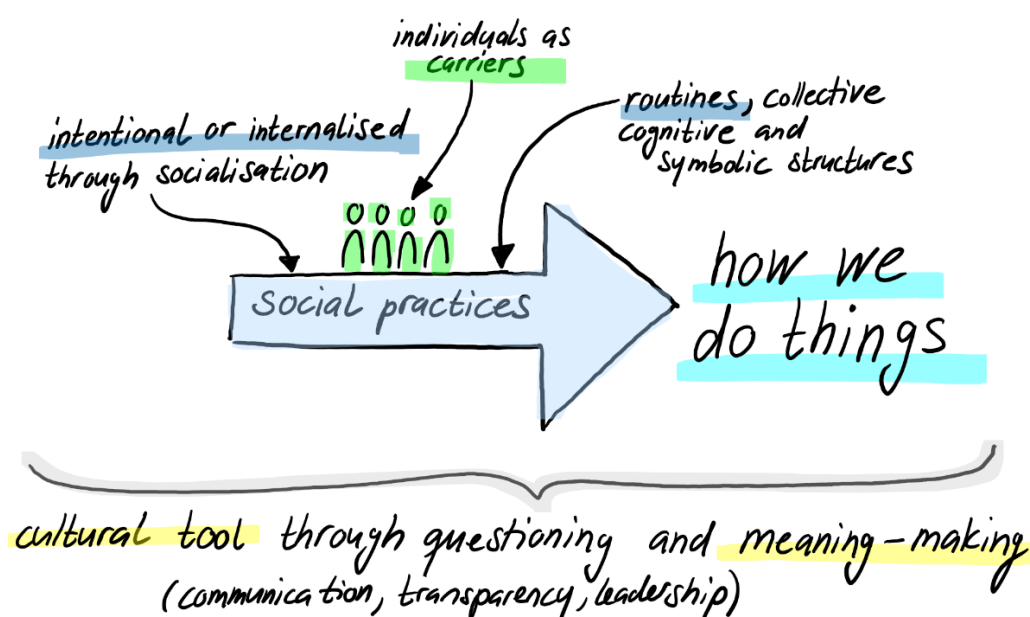


Figure 7 Social practices  
Own figure

### (3) Requirements for agile people management

The exposition of agile organisations in this chapter painted a picture of a new work environment: one where work is delivered collaboratively in network structures, relying on self-organisation. And if an organisation seeks to foster autonomy, individual and organisational learning need to be guided by autonomy as well – anything else would be self-contradictory (Arnold, 2002, p. 26).

Section 2.3 revealed how the current HRM paradigm falls short in dealing with the complexity of this kind of work environment, likely to create organisational friction when applied in an agile context. The introductory chapter 1, however, highlighted that while suitable frameworks might be missing, first-movers are already exploring new approaches to HRM in agile organisations. Based on these observations, Table 11 summarises the requirements that people management must fulfil in an agile context.

*Table 11 Requirements for people management in agile organisations*

Being talent-led	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focused on talent instead of strategy</li></ul>
Embracing complexity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Integrating complexity instead of omitting or outsourcing it</li></ul>
Driving dynamic capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fostering practices such as self-reflection, learning, sharing, collaborating</li></ul>
Founded on social practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enabling the reproduction or adaption of shared social practices through: distributed leadership as well as self-reflection, critical thinking and communication skills</li></ul>

The following chapter 3 is dedicated to developing a suitable research methodology for how these emerging practice can be described, analysed and synthesised into such a much-needed framework – taking into account the requirements for agile people management as summarised above, while looking at it through the lens of *HRM as a shared social practice*.

### 3. Research methodology

Chapter 1 identified a research gap where little is known about a contextual phenomenon. Potentially useful literature surrounding this gap was then explored in chapter 2, in particular the possibility to frame people management in agile organisations as a shared social practice. Gray (2018, p. 163) notes that a qualitative research design is appropriate for research of this type. By observing the phenomenon in a context-related manner, qualitative research meets the requirements of complex practice (Richards, 2009, p. 9). Despite their suitability, qualitative methods are still used sparsely in business research (Göthlich, 2003, pp. 1-2).

Qualitative data is collected in this thesis by means of a multiple-case study, which allows the in-depth exploration of emerging agile people management in practice, as explained in the following section 3.1. The collected data is examined for common patterns and recurring themes (see section 3.2) with the help of topic analysis and concept mapping, and presented in single-case and cross-case summaries (in chapters 4 and 5, respectively). Section 3.3 outlines how this research ensures validity by integrating different perspectives throughout, thus seeing validity as a process rather than a single step. Figure 8 below visually summarises the chosen research design that is explained further in the remainder of this chapter.

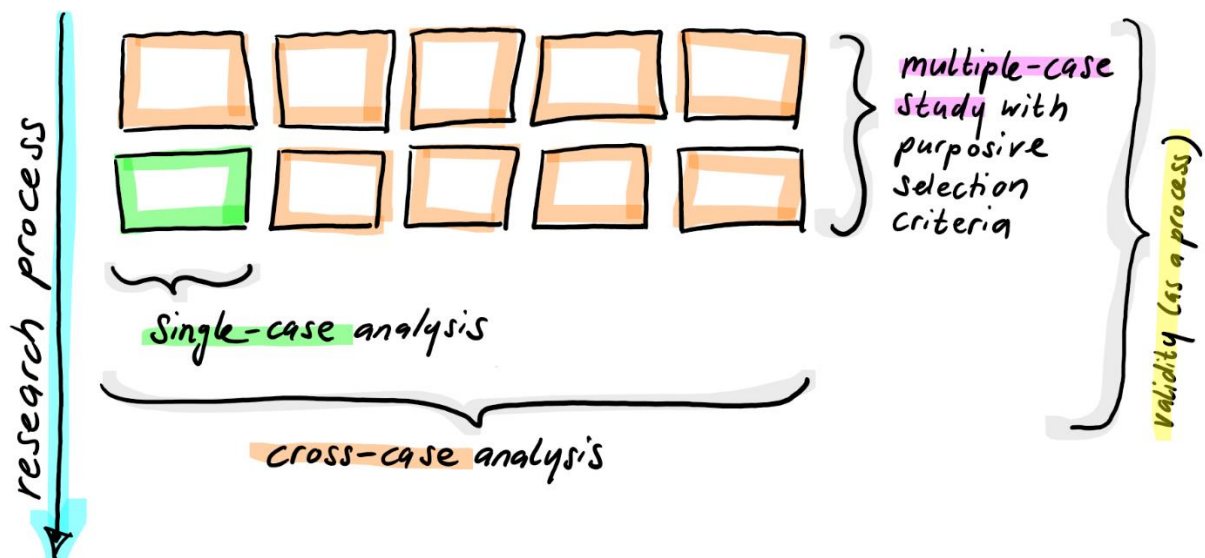


Figure 8 Summary of research design  
Own figure

### 3.1. Multiple-case study

As this research investigates emergent people management practices, a multiple-case study is an insightful methodology to “study a phenomenon within its real-world context” (Yin, 2012, p. 5). Case studies are known for their aptness for applied research, by providing a data-rich and exploratory approach beyond looking at single variables (Dooley, 2002, p. 338; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). Belonging to the empirical methodologies, case studies are mid-way on the continuum between induction and deduction and can lean either way, as illustrated in Figure 9 (Göthlich, 2003, p. 7). Some scholars emphasise the value of case studies as a theory-free and “intrinsic study of a valued particular” (Stake, 2003, p. 140). Others see it as a valuable tool for generating insight that can lead to a furthered understanding in a larger context (Yin, 2012, p. 18). This research follows the latter theory, where the ultimate goal is “new learning about real-world behaviour and its meaning” (Yin, 2012, p. 4). In this instance, a theoretical angle on HR work and people management (see section 2.3) sets the starting point to a process that can be described as pendular movement between data collection and concepts, working towards theoretical saturation.

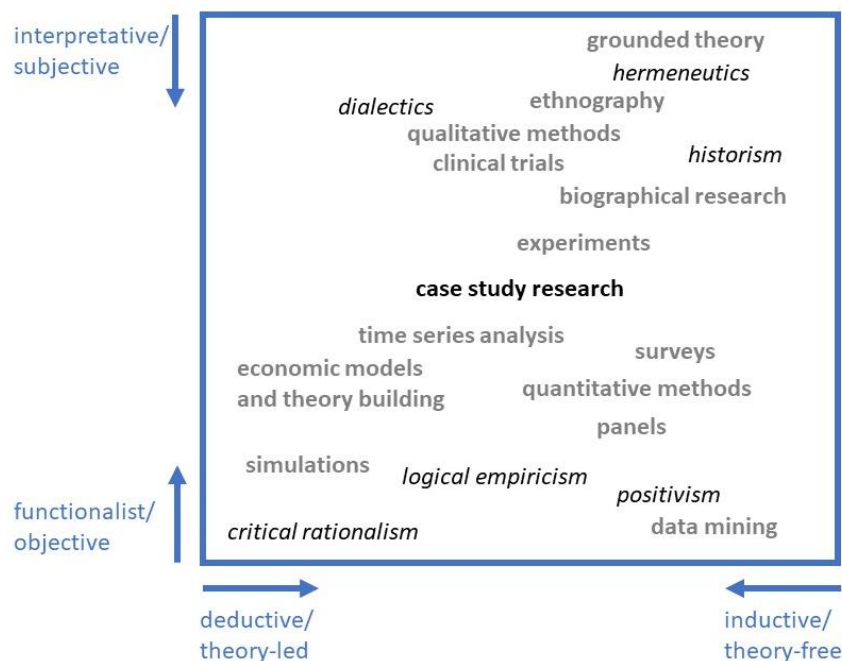


Figure 9 Case study as a methodological approach  
Based on: Borchardt and Göthlich (2009, p. 35)

#### Building theory through cases

Section 2.4 consolidated the limited pre-existing literature on HR work in agile organisations (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, p. 11). The gap identified in HR theory, as indicated in section 1.3, therefore suggests the use of a theory-building approach, by proposing *how* and *why* questions that may be answered with the cases studied. With this goal in mind, the replication logic of multiple-case studies comes into play, where every case presents an analytic unit that allows comparing and contrasting (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, pp. 25-27; Kuckartz et al.,



2008, p. 11; Ridder, 2017, p. 287). Building explanations through multiple cases takes time, as patterns and insight only emerge through the ongoing collection and analysis of data in a reiterative process. In this case, emerging HR practices are observed in different settings and can thus confirm or reject emerging explanations, resulting in analytic (instead of statistical) generalisation (Dooley, 2002, p. 336; Yin, 2012, pp. 5-6).

### 3.1.1. Case selection

As mentioned in the section above, with theory-building being the goal of this study, a theoretical approach to selecting cases is appropriate (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27; Ridder, 2017, p. 282). Hence, organisations that are likely to exhibit new HR practices, and are willing to provide access to them, are identified as so-called *information-rich* cases. Following this definition, the identification of typical patterns is given more weight than statements about distribution (Helfferich, 2009, p. 173; Patton, 2002, p. 242). The organisations are selected based upon a set of criteria derived from the research objectives and aims outlined in section 1.4. Therefore, the research adopts a theory-based case selection, where the sample “becomes, by definition and selection, representative of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 238).

In section 2.2, IT companies were identified as being among the first movers in incorporating business agility across their whole organisation, including people management. This seems to be particularly the case in SMEs, with a direct link between their ability to empower employees and their performance, as outlined in section 2.3. The same section also showed that SMEs are used to navigating the tensions that are characteristic for agile organisations as well, such as the need for organisational ambidexterity through strengthening their dynamic capability. These organisations are hence most likely to contain utilisable data material regarding the research goal. Due to this reasoning, the context is limited to small-to-medium-sized expert organisations in the service sector, within or close to the IT industry. Table 12 illustrates the criteria for identifying suitable organisations.

Table 12 Case selection criteria

Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Zealand or Switzerland</li> </ul>
Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMEs: maximum size as outlined by Northern American criteria, where SMEs include businesses with fewer than 500 employees (United States International Trade Commission, 2010, p. 3)</li> </ul>
Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service sector</li> <li>• Expert organisation with knowledge workers</li> <li>• Within or close to the IT sector</li> </ul>
Organisational form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agile organisation with a mature state of agility (using the criteria summarised in Table 10 as well as the categorisation by Werder and Maedche (2018, p. 10) mentioned in section 2.2)</li> </ul>
Approach to HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-declared departure from the current HR paradigm (as described in section 2.3)</li> </ul>

Based on these criteria, ten cases were selected across the two countries, with six companies being located in New Zealand and four in Switzerland. These two countries were both accessible to the researcher and relatively comparable in the parameters concerning this research, which maximised the pool of potential cases. Due to the nature of the research (i.e. focused on a semantic level) and the relative comparability of the two countries regarding aspects with possible relevance to this project, the potential bias is negligible. These aspects include economic and demographic structures and challenges in the workplace (such as knowledge workers, demographic change, individualisation, lack of skilled workers, etcetera). However, language differences and cultural settings were taken into considerations when analysing the data.

Expanding the scope to both countries quickly turned out to be worthwhile, as the initial goal to select between eight and twelve companies soon proved to be more challenging than anticipated. Finding potential case study organisations that lived up to the set business agility criteria proved to be especially difficult. While many organisations approached during the case selection process claimed to be agile, it quickly became evident that their definition was merely based on their core business processes. Hence, while they may have adopted agile methodologies for their project management, the underlying principles were rarely applied to other parts of the organisation. This divide is reflected in section 2.1 versus 2.2, respectively. As a result, the initial criterion for organisation size was adjusted from the Swiss definition for maximum employee number for SMEs (i.e. 250 employees) to a maximum of 500 employees, a definition for example used in the United States (BFS Bundesamt für Statistik, 2020; United States International Trade Commission, 2010).

#### The question of anonymity

Bernard (2006, p. 78) notes the importance of availability and willingness to participate, which includes ethical issues. The protection of the anonymity and confidentiality of participating individuals or organisations can be a critical aspect when doing case studies. However, as this study focuses on new emerging practices of first movers, there are no notable limitations regarding ethics or reasons to suggest an anonymous setting. The organisations in question were open to sharing their practices and opinions, as it gives them an opportunity to convey a positive and progressive image of their company. Nevertheless, the issue was raised in the preliminary planning stage with each organisation and measures to protect confidential information could have been taken (such as anonymisation of primary data) if the need had arisen. In order not to influence data collection in other case study organisations, organisations were also asked to non-disclose their participation in this research until all data collection has been finalised.

The main source of data collection in these ten organisations is interviews. Table 13 therefore gives an overview of the selected case study companies and interview partners. How the interview data was gathered and processed is explained in the following section.

Table 13 Case study organisations (in alphabetical order)

Name (Founded)	Location(s) (visited)	Employees	Services	Interviewees, role (self-attribution)	Notes
<b>Boost</b> (2000)	Wellington (NZ)	28	<b>IT:</b> web and software development services; <b>Consulting:</b> Agile training	<b>Natalie Foley:</b> HR Manager <b>Nathan Donaldson:</b> CEO	
<b>CerebralFix Limited</b> (2009)	Christchurch (NZ)	50	<b>IT:</b> Game, VR and app developing	<b>Gwyn Edwards:</b> CTO <b>Nadia Thorne:</b> General Manager	
<b>dot consulting</b> (2017)	Remote (CH)	9	<b>Consulting:</b> organisational development, strategy development, Agile coaching	<b>Samuel Gerber:</b> HR Consultant, Professional and Organisational Development <b>Tobias Ellenberger:</b> Trainer, Facilitator, Coach	
<b>Ergon</b> (1984)	Zurich (CH)	300	<b>IT:</b> software development and software products	<b>Birgit Erdtner:</b> Team leader <b>Claudia Zirn:</b> Head of Human Resources <b>Gabriela Keller:</b> CEO	
<b>Humankind</b> (2012)	Wellington (NZ)	26	<b>Consulting:</b> Employee experience, employer branding, HR advisors	<b>Kalyn Ponti:</b> COO <b>Samantha Gadd:</b> CEO	
<b>Liip</b> (2007)	Berne (CH)	170	<b>IT:</b> design, creation and development (web and mobile); <b>Consulting:</b> strategy development and consulting	<b>Nadia Perroulaz:</b> Co-Founder and Partner <b>Vera Lorenzi:</b> HR Specialist	Other branches in Zurich, Lausanne, Fribourg and St. Gallen (all CH); total of 170 employees across all branches
<b>Redvespa</b> (2003)	Christchurch (NZ) Wellington (NZ)	120	<b>Consulting:</b> Business Analysis	<b>Sarah Gibson:</b> CEO <b>Vaughn Luckmann:</b> Principal Consultant	Other branches in Auckland and Christchurch (all in NZ); total of 120 employees across all branches
<b>Snapper</b> (2006)	Wellington (NZ)	40	<b>IT:</b> contactless smart cards, ticketing interfaces and apps, end-to-end ticketing provider	<b>Miki Szikszai:</b> CEO <b>Norman Comerford:</b> CTO <b>Rémy Roques:</b> Agile Coach	
<b>STRÖER labs</b> (2008)	Christchurch (NZ)	31	<b>IT:</b> developing solutions to deliver backend services (i.e. ad-tech stack)	<b>Ben Baldwin:</b> CEO <b>Jens Richnow:</b> CTO <b>Suzanne Moreton:</b> HR Coordinator	Part of STRÖER labs with main branch in Berlin (DE) and another branch in Opava (CZ); total of 80 employees across all branches
<b>Unic</b> (1996)	Zurich (CH) Berne (CH)	250	<b>IT:</b> design, creation and development (B2B and B2C focus)	<b>Nadine Blum:</b> Human Resources Manager <b>Nadine Schlegel:</b> Head of Human Resources <b>Roy Voggenberger:</b> Lead Link Service Business	Other branches in Karlsruhe (DE), Munich (DE) and Wrocław (PL); total of 250 employees across all branches

Information based on both interviews and online sources (i.e. websites, LinkedIn) (date accessed: 24 June 2020)

### 3.1.2. Data collection and handling

As outlined in the previous section, interviews make up the majority of the data collected in the ten selected organisations. Choosing two to three suitable interview partners was left to the companies concerned. Asking explicitly to interview HR staff might have limited the explorative power of this study: the emerging literature on agile organisations suggests a decrease of staff functions and to some extent questions its existence altogether (as mentioned in section 2.3). Hence, this terminology was carefully avoided. Instead, it was specified that the scope of interest includes roles who shape people management and HR in the organisation, and who might be able to give insight into the reasons behind current processes and practices. Interviewing at least two people per organisation also mitigates potential bias, adding to the data triangulation (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 28).

#### Interview process and data handling

Roughly a week before the scheduled interviews, interview guides were sent out via email and included the encouragement to bring along documents or other aids to support the narrative (such as photographs, websites, leaflets or brochures). These artifacts were included in the data collection, as the integration of different types of evidence can help to make findings more robust (Yin, 2012, p. 13). Because data was only collected once, it captures a snapshot of the status quo of the different organisations and their relevant practices, rendering the research design cross-sectional (Bryman, 2011, p. 54). The use of an interview guide structured the conversation while still allowing open questions, resulting in a semi-structured interview approach (Flick, 2014, p. 194).

The interview guide was drafted based on the preliminary literature research, acting as a “bridge between the researcher’s interests and the field” (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 51). It structures the interviews according to four clusters: **(1) Values** as an organisation, **(2) motivation** and drivers for their chosen approach to people management, **(3)** examples of current HR and people management **practices** that show their chosen approach and **(4)** their organisational **structure** with a focus on people management and HR work. As a result of theoretical reflections, the interview guide enabled the researcher to stay focused on the relevant topics, which increased the comparability of the individual interviews (Liebold & Trinczek, 2009, p. 38). These clusters reflect the emerging literature on agile organisations and their requirements in regard to HR and people management, as summarised in section 2.4. The varied perspectives ensure that the research was conducted in an open and explorative manner without prematurely limiting itself to superficial practices. Instead, it accommodates the explanatory strength of being able to embed practices in enabling structures and principles. Covering areas such as values and structures also served as a validation of the chosen organisations and whether they still held up against the case selection criteria in section 3.1.1 above.

While the first few interviews were conducted with a full version of the interview guide, it soon became evident that interviewees were less interested in reading about the details of the

research project. Many mentioned that the research gap was adamantly clear to them and did not need further explanation. The majority of interviewees also admitted to not having been able to take the time to read through all the information and questions before the interview. As a result, the interview guide and communication were stream-lined for later interviews, which was appreciated by later interviewees. The final version of the interview guide can be found as an appendix.

A total of 24 interviews was conducted across the ten organisations, with most interviews lasting about an hour. The interviews were audio-recorded and consequently transcribed in full. Bryman (2011, pp. 482-483) describe transcripts as an invaluable aid when it comes to reconstructing statements and arguments – albeit being rather time-consuming to produce. The transcripts were created as a basic word-for-word transcription, as the analysis focuses on their semantic content that does not require a higher level of detail (Kuckartz, 2007, p. 27; Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 99). Transcription guidelines ensured comparability of the data, e.g. by setting guidelines on processing nonverbal references or colloquial expressions (Dittmar, 2004, pp. 227-228). In total, 366 pages of transcript were produced. Interviews were conducted in the chosen language of the participants (i.e. Swiss-German, German or English) and translations are provided by the researcher with the original reply, when cited, in a footnote. The full transcripts are available from the researcher upon request.

## 3.2. Data analysis

As a first step, the interview transcripts were analysed with the use of a topic analysis, a suitable method for such large quantities of texts (Mayring, 2000, paragraph 4). The topic analysis, described in more detail in the following section 3.2.1, helped to structure the data and identify patterns: initially to summarise individual cases and consequently to look for common themes in people management practices across the ten selected organisations (Dooley, 2002, p. 343).

The individual and cross-case analysis was supported by the creation of concept maps, not only as a tool to further interpret and establish relationships in the data, but also as a method to present it in a visual and reduced form (see section 3.2.2). Interview participants were given the opportunity to comment on the concept maps, as a part of the validation process that is explained in section 3.3.

### 3.2.1. Topic analysis

Processing the interview transcripts via *topic analysis* ensured that every analytical step had a strong relationship with the research objectives and aims in section 1.4, by assigning transcript passages to different codes in a systematic yet flexible process (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137; Schreier, 2014, pp. 170-171). Thereby, the transcripts were structured, reduced in complexity and interpreted (Mayring & Fenzl, 2014, pp. 543-544). Text passages were coded in an iterative process, determined by whether they answer the *why*- and *how*-questions about HR work in the selected organisations (Roulston, 2014, p. 305; Saldaña, 2009, pp. 3, 6). This procedure allowed the researcher to see across the individual data and identify general, recurring topics (Richards, 2009, pp. 93, 100).

The initial set of codes used for marking passages, as shown in Figure 10, was based on conceptual considerations, drawing on the interview guide mentioned in section 3.1.2 and the emergent literature outlined in section 2.3.



Figure 10 Initial coding system (before starting coding)  
Own figure

During the process of coding, these codes were continually adjusted (Gläser & Laudel, 2009, pp. 199-200). These changes were made to better reflect the marked segments, for example because a certain theme kept recurring, could not be covered by existing codes, was redundant or repetitive. Table 14 illustrates these changes.

Table 14 Changes leading up to the final coding system (for transcription data)

<b>Values</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Adding <i>networks / relationship</i> as an individual code</li> <li>– <i>Core-values of the organisation</i> expanded to <i>purpose / values / principles</i></li> </ul>
<b>Motivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Drivers / aha-moments</i> merged with <i>perceived benefits of chosen approach</i></li> </ul>
<b>Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Expanding <i>HR admin</i> to <i>HR admin / legal</i></li> <li>– Adding <i>salary / finances</i> as an individual code</li> <li>– Expanding <i>recruiting</i> to <i>recruiting / employer branding</i></li> <li>– Expanding <i>onboarding</i> to <i>on- / offboarding</i></li> <li>– <i>Training / development</i> and <i>performance reviews</i> merged to <i>development / performance</i></li> <li>– Deletion of <i>coaching</i> as an individual category, as it concurred with either <i>development / performance</i> and/or <i>communication / feedback</i></li> </ul>
<b>Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Relabelling <i>HR within the organisation</i> as <i>organisational structure</i> to be more inclusive</li> <li>– Expanding <i>self-concept of HR role</i> to <i>self-concept of HR / people management</i> to allow a more inclusive view in line with emerging themes</li> </ul>

To facilitate the process of coding, the data was processed with the help of the software maxQDA, which made it easy to edit codes (e.g. merge or re-label) for already marked transcripts further along the process. After incorporating the above changes, the final coding system used to code all data is summarised in Table 15. The various coding cycles, including new data as it was collected, resulted in a *saturation of categories* as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 359), with little new information emerging and a sense of integration towards the end of the data collection.

Table 15 Final coding system (for transcription data)

<b>Values</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Networks / relationships</li> <li>– Purpose / values / principles</li> <li>– Image of the human person</li> <li>– Definition of leadership</li> <li>– Learning organisation</li> </ul>
<b>Motivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Drivers / aha-moments</li> </ul>
<b>Framing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Frameworks / literature / models</li> </ul>
<b>Practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– HR admin / legal</li> <li>– Salary / finances</li> <li>– Recruiting / employer branding</li> <li>– On- / offboarding</li> <li>– Development / performance</li> <li>– Communication / feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Structure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Organisational structure</li> <li>– Self-concept of HR / people management</li> <li>– Decision-making capacity</li> </ul>

Unconscious bias of the researcher is a known limitation of this method. To independently check the final coding system, another researcher was asked to peer-code several transcript sections, with remarkably similar results and only minor differences in code overlaps. After the coding process, a total number of 1557 codes were allocated across the 24 interviews.

Table 16 shows the allocation of individual codes across the transcripts. For example, the codes *network / relationship*, *purpose / value / principles* or *organisational structure* were applied to every single transcript, whereas the code *HR admin / legal* was used in only nine documents. Table 17 then depicts the total number of times each code was allocated across all transcripts, with the code *purpose / values / principles* again ranking the highest with a total of 237 marked passages, whereas *HR admin / legal* was applied only 16 times. These frequencies are reflected on as a part of the synthesis in chapter 6.



Table 16 Code frequency across documents

Code	Frequency (documents)
Network / relationships	24
Purpose / values / principles	24
Organisational structure	24
Learning organisation	23
Communication / feedback	23
Image of the human person	23
Recruiting / employer branding	22
Development / performance	22
Definition of leadership	20
Frameworks / literature / models	20
Decision-making capacity	19
On- / offboarding	18
Self-concept of HR / people management	17
Drivers / aha-moments	14
Salary / finances	14
HR admin / legal	9

Table 17 Total code frequency across segments

Code	Frequency (segments)
Purpose / values / principles	237
Learning organisation	173
Development / performance	142
Organisational structure	140
Frameworks / literature / models	131
Communication / feedback	122
Recruiting / employer branding	115
Self-concept of HR / people management	103
Definition of leadership	73
Decision-making capacity	71
Network / relationships	70
Image of the human person	50
On- / offboarding	50
Salary / finances	40
Drivers / aha-moments	24
HR admin / legal	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>1157</b>

### Case summaries

After coding all the transcripts, the next step of analysis involved case-wise evaluation, or *case summaries*. That entailed exporting all the coded text passages from the transcripts, for each individual case. These passages were then condensed, tagged with labels regarding their content and re-grouped accordingly. Chapter 4 contains all individual case summaries, as a rich description of how these ten organisations organise their HR work, the reasoning behind it, and how they embed their practices in the organisational structures. At this stage, information from documents and other artifacts was also incorporated, in the rare case that they were not mentioned as part of the interviews.

Subsequently, each case was distilled into a visual summary, using the methodology of *concept mapping* that is defined in section 3.2.2 below. In short, concept maps not only helped the researcher establish links across the different topics, but also served as a way to concisely present the single case summary for *member checking*, a validation process explained in section 3.3.

### Cross-case summary

After gaining an overview over each individual case, the next step included looking for themes across all ten individual cases. When looking at the individual transcripts, it was notable that many passages were allocated to more than one code. Therefore, instead of using the same system for organising the single-case summaries (as previously shown in Table 15 above), the structure was again adjusted. Where crossover was substantial, codes were consequently merged during the cross-case analysis in an effort to emphasise patterns across the data.

Figure 11 shows an excerpt of code co-occurrence across all cases, which was used as reference tool in this process. It shows, for instance, that the codes *development / performance* and *communication / feedback* were allocated to many of the same transcript passages (marked in blue), which lead to both codes being merged in the course of the cross-case analysis. Likewise, the codes *organisational structure* and *frameworks / literature / models* have shown substantial overlap (marked in grey), which may be explained with most of the frameworks mentioned being organisational models (such as Holacracy).

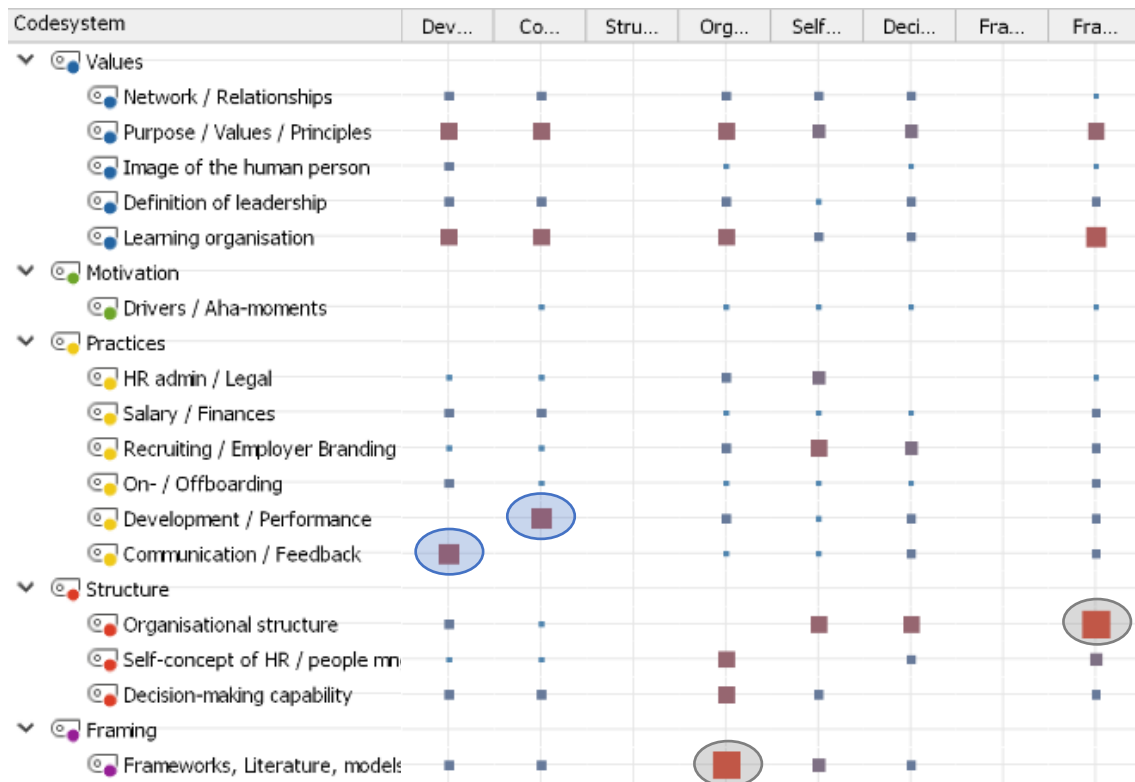


Figure 11 Code co-occurrence (excerpt)

Exported from maxQDA

Later, the different categories were also renamed to better reflect their emerging content.

Table 18 shows the final structure used for the cross-case analysis in chapter 5.

Table 18 Structure of cross-case analysis

Core principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Purpose, values, principles, image of the human person</li> <li>– Network, relationships, learning organisation</li> </ul>
Concept of HR and people aspects as an organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-concept of HR, people management, HR admin</li> <li>– Leadership</li> </ul>
Examples of embedding values in practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Recruiting, employer branding, on- / offboarding</li> <li>– Development, performance, communication, feedback</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Decision-making capacity, salary / finances, drivers / aha-moments and frameworks / literature / models have been allocated to other segments they correspond with.</i></li> </ul>
Enabling organisational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Organising HR work</li> <li>– Organisational structure</li> </ul>

Similar to the concept mapping process for the individual cases, the cross-case analysis was also concluded with the creation of a concept map that summarises the emergent people management practices across the ten agile organisations. In addition, this final concept map also incorporates references of the literature review (i.e. chapter 2) and is thus included in the synthesis in chapter 6 rather than directly being a part of the cross-case summary in chapter 5.

### 3.2.2. Concept mapping

A by-product of qualitative research has become abundantly clear throughout this methodology chapter: an enormous amount of data is produced in the course of it, as evidenced in chapters 4 and 5. For this reason, a complementary method for condensing data and presenting was desired and promptly found in the form of *concept mapping*, as briefly mentioned in section 3.2.1 above.

Concept mapping refers to the graphical organisation and representation of insight in a visual manner. Thus, they not only facilitate understanding by providing a structural and easily accessible summary, but also effectively reduce data. Kinchin et al. (2010, p. 53) describe concept mapping as “enriching the interpretation of information”. Following the constructivist learning perspective, it aids reflection by illustrating explicit links between relevant elements. Concept maps essentially “permit the viewer to understand complex phenomena at a glance in order to make new connections” in a non-linear way (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010, p. 6). In short, they allow the viewer to experience the richness of the narratives in the original data while presenting it in a manageable way (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 29).

Concept maps were used for two purposes: *firstly*, they provided data display with increased clarity and comprehensibility for each of the single-case summaries (chapter 4). Figure 12 below shows an example of a single-case summary concept map (for a larger version of it, refer to Figure 16 in section 4.4). As a form of validation, each case study company was also invited to comment on their own map before moving on to the cross-case summary, to check whether individual summaries were in line with the company’s self-conception. *Secondly*, the creation of an overarching concept map concludes the synthesis in section 6.1. Figure 27 depicts a framework for agile people management in an abstract way, thus not only representing the cross-case summary (chapter 5), but also incorporating insights from the literature (chapter 2). As such, it was not only used to check for evidence saturation, but also provided the basis for the validation of the empirically grounded conceptual framework in a similar process than the one described earlier for the individual case concept maps.

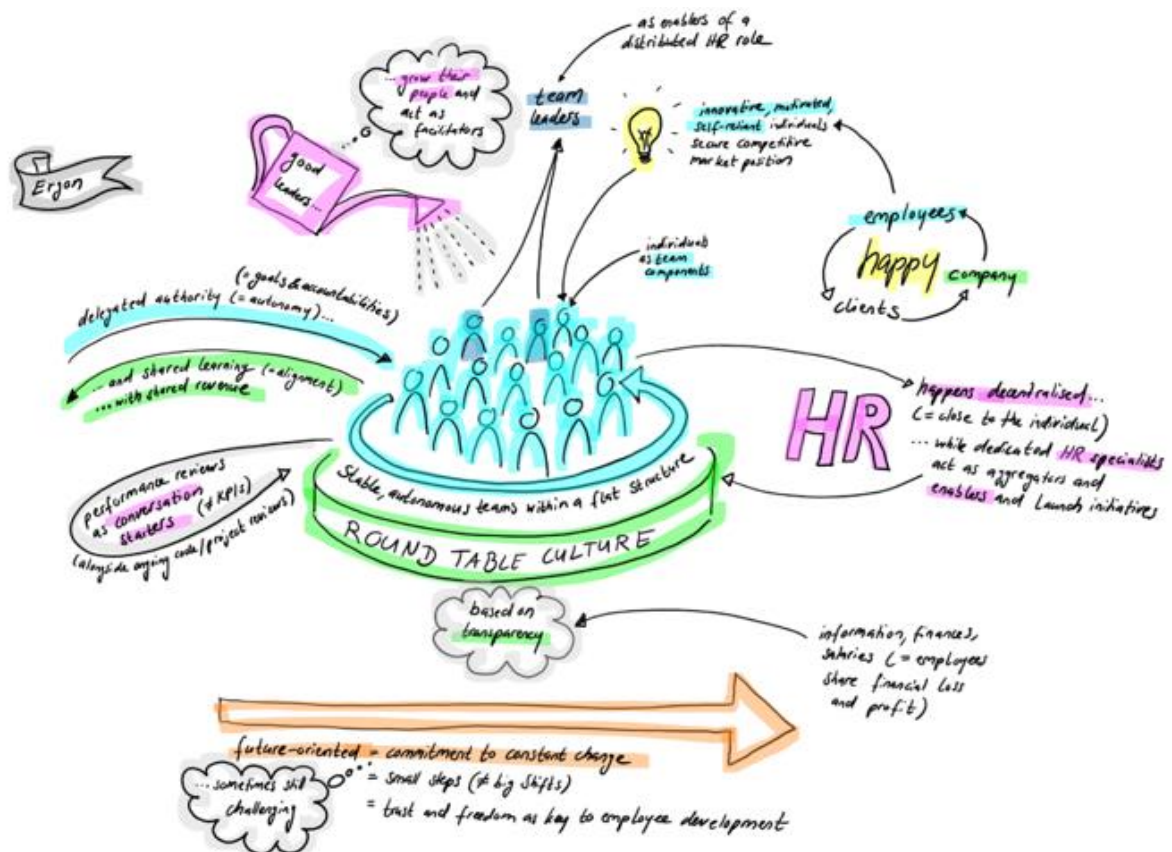


Figure 12 Example of a concept map (single-case summary)

Own figure

Two major limitations of the method were negligible, as the data collected focused on relationships, values or concepts instead of single variables, and there was sufficient understanding of the research context for the researcher to be able to interpret the phenomenon described (Kinchin et al., 2010, pp. 65-66).

### 3.3. Ensuring validity

To date, there is no academic consensus about the use of quality criteria in qualitative research (Lamnek & Krell, 2010, p. 128). Various concepts, such as the ones brought forward by Borchardt and Göthlich (2009, pp. 44-46) or Dooley (2002, pp. 338-341) try to adapt typical criteria known in quantitative research for their use in qualitative research. These criteria include (1) construct validity, (2) internal validity, (3) reliability, (4) objectivity and (5) external validity. However, other scholars have debated whether criteria derived from quantitative research succeed in addressing the complex reality of qualitative research. Befitting the rich description and interpretation of a socially constructed phenomenon in this study, a more holistic view on quality was found in the framework proposed by Cho and Trent (2006, pp. 320-324). In their framework, they integrate both *transactional* and *transformational* aspects into validity. Their approach transcends the often-adopted mechanical approach that mimics quantitative methodologies: hoping the employment of rigid techniques will somehow guarantee a valid outcome. Instead, this alternative stance considers validity an omni-present process of “thinking out loud” instead of reducing validity to a few clear linear steps (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 327).

Ultimately, the concepts outlined above were combined to an integrated approach to validity that maximises the soundness of theory-building in the present case study research. As a result, the following criteria have acted as guiding principles to ensure validity throughout the research process.

**Transactional criteria** focus mainly on the interaction between the inquiry and research participants. Creswell and Miller (2000, pp. 124-126) add for consideration that transactional aspects need to include three angles to be deemed valid: the researcher, the participants as well as reviewers not affiliated with the project. These different perspectives have been incorporated into the criteria below, with a predominantly postpositivist position that contributes to rigid transactional validity.

- Selecting the correct tools and methods guarantees **construct validity**: the goal of exploring emergent HR practice is well grounded in literature and answers *why*- and *how*-questions, which justifies using a theory-expanding case study methodology (as explained in section 3.1). Triangulation through the multiple-case design and the integration of different data collection methods also compensates for the weaknesses of individual sources.
- **Internal validity** refers to the validity of the proposed causal relationships. The iterative, open process of comparing and contrasting data creates a dense argumentation and credible line of evidence. This aspect is strengthened by the involvement of participants (i.e. member checking) and the fact that they felt

comfortable in pointing out flaws in the collected data (e.g. with the help of the concept maps explained in section 3.2.2).

- Systematic documentation of the research process increases **reliability**. However, due to the strong context-specific approach and the high degree of uniqueness of qualitative case studies, strict reliability (i.e. in the sense of repeatability) is less important than leaving a clear audit trail. Peer-coding, as mentioned in section 3.2.1, is an example of ensuring reliability by involving a third party.
- Similarly, **objectivity** is not reached through quantitative standardisation, but through intersubjective verifiability, i.e. explanation of the process and the interpretation as well as making primary data accessible (such as interview transcripts in this case). These measurements ensure the researcher is not being too close to the content. Including a thick description in the final report (as exemplified by chapter 4) also contributes to objectivity from a constructivist point of view.

Perhaps a more radical approach to the very notion of validity, **transformational criteria** determine validity based on the resultant actions prompted by the research endeavour. Research counts as valid, for instance, if it leads towards changing an existing social condition and reflects a “deeper, self-reflective and empathic understanding of the researcher while working with the researched” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 324).

- **External validity** is ensured through the process of analytical generalisation (as opposed to statistical generalisation) clarified in section 3.1. That findings can not only be integrated into the existing literature (see chapter 2), but also be used beyond the cases studied is a crucial transformational aspect. The interest of the participating case study companies, for example in hearing how other organisations answer the same questions, serves as an endorsement of external validity. Furthermore, several theory-expanding practices have already been implemented in practice, as illustrated in section 6.2, further attributing the transformational power of this research.

## 4. Single-case summaries

The research results are presented in two chapters. The present chapter 4 includes the summaries of the people management practices in each individual company selected, whereas the next chapter 5 gives an overview across all ten organisations – especially focussing on common themes in their approach to HR work.

In this chapter, each individual case is first presented in the form of a concept map, providing a visual summary that structures the organisation's approach to people aspects at a quick glance (as explained in section 3.2.2). The rest of each section illustrates the organisation's approach to people management both in a written summary, as well as in direct quotes from interview partners. Including these rich and in-depth summaries reflects the idea of the thick description, through which others may re-construct these organisations' reality, as explained in the methodology chapter and particularly section 3.2.1.

The structure of each case summary mirrors the final coding system used for analysing the interview data, which was illustrated in Table 15 in the same section of the methodology chapter. Hence, the case summaries are divided into five segments.

Values were identified in section 2.2 as being a driving force in agile organisations, as they enable an alternative approach to alignment in an environment with little formal structure. Accordingly, the opening segments include the organisations' **(1) values** and principles as well as their view on people and how they learn or connect. The following segment clarifies the **(2) motivation** for their chosen agile approach and might include drivers or aha-moments, which leads to different frameworks, literature reference or models mentioned throughout the interviews as a way of **(3) framing** their actions. Naturally, a major focus of the summaries lies on the organisations' current people management and HR **(4) practices**, spanning the whole employee life cycle (such as recruiting, onboarding, remuneration or development, etcetera) as well as general practices in relation to communication and feedback. The last segment shows how these practices are embedded in an enabling organisational **(5) structure**, with a particular emphasis on how people management responsibilities are organised, and the reasoning behind it.

These summaries raise no claim to completeness, as they do not attempt to objectively sum up the structure and processes of the organisations in their entirety. Instead, their value lies in illustrating these companies' approach to integrating people-centricity into their structure and practices, as elaborated on during the interviews and exemplified in other data sources.



#### 4.1. Boost

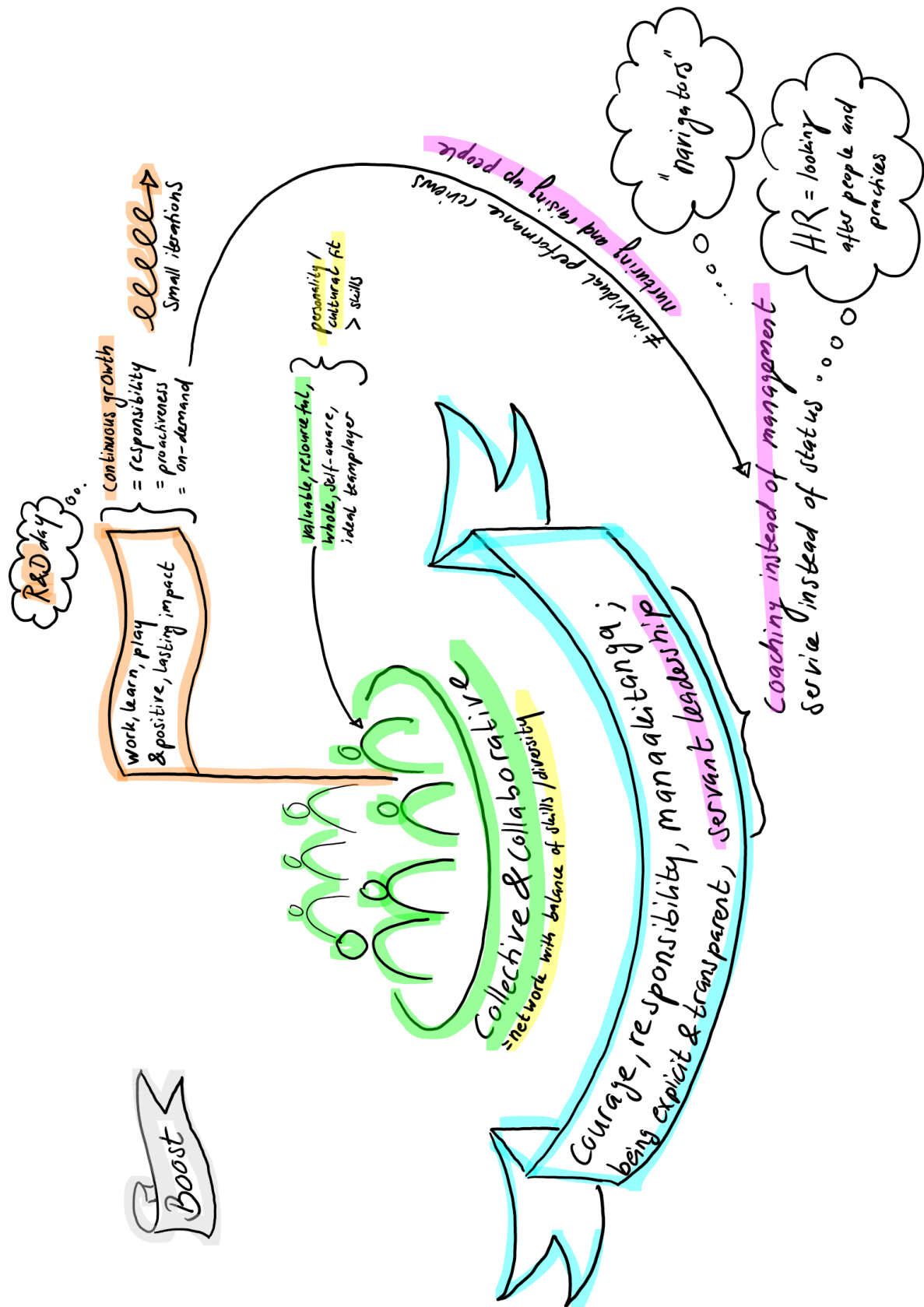


Figure 13 Concept map: Boost  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Importance of the collective and fostering relationships:** Employees rate themselves every fortnight on their contribution to the Boost culture, which takes place during coaching sessions. Company-wide fortnightly R&D days or re-allocating desks every week are examples of how the organisation fosters personal relationships across the organisation. Building relationships is also seen as a major focus during onboarding, with the goal that new employees get comfortable interacting with a wider range of co-workers. This focus on teamwork also extends to hiring decisions, which are largely done through collaborative decision-making, as the team is required to work together as a whole afterwards.

*“We're moving around every week and sometimes people stay, you know, close by with the teams that they're working with. Other times they'll be a bit more distant. [...] They choose themselves. Everything, as much as possible, they choose themselves. [...] That means that people, they tend to get to know other people a bit more, because they get to be in close proximity to them and then we've got those R&D days as well” (Donaldson / 0:34:36).*

*“And then people kind of talk about... kind of rate themselves on how well they contributed to Boost culture over that fortnight, whether that's going up or down or flat line or whatever” (Foley / 0:14:58).*

*“As much as we can, we like to involve more of the team because everyone's going to work with that person. It's not just me” (Foley / 0:33:06).*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Vision and purpose around people and lasting impact:** the organisation's vision is focused on internal aspects: *where New Zealanders work, learn and play in a safe-to-fail environment*. Hence, there is a strong people-centric motive, also because finding the right people is viewed as the one limiting factor to the company's growth. The purpose is aimed at *creating positive lasting impact*, which is reflecting the conviction that maximising financial profit is not the goal.

**Embedding values in practice:** as it is something that has been invested in strongly, the organisation members describe that they are very protective of their culture. To ensure people live up to it and prevent lip service, values are embedded in practice and dictate how the company operates.

**Core values: Courage, responsibility, servant leadership, manaakitanga:** the organisation has not only distilled its beliefs down to four core values, but also provides its employees with a description of behaviours that each of them entails, in order to avoid different interpretation. *Manaakitanga* is a concept from Māori culture and centres around making people feel welcome, creating a safe environment for them to be successful, nurturing relationships and raising others up. It therefore includes aspects of empowerment.

**Transparency:** Transparency is used as a guiding principle and includes being explicit and transparent in everything you do.

**Ideal team player:** a person living up to the core values is called *an ideal team player* and is characterised with the three adjectives *hungry, humble* and *smart*, where smart is more aimed at being people-smart and self-aware.

**Balancing collective and individual:** the organisation is built around balancing collective and individual aspects, using democratic principles. By default, there is no focus on individual rewards, as everyone is supposed to be helping each other and individual rewards might be detrimental to that. Investing in employee engagement is another major focus and includes the three areas of overcoming anonymity (e.g. by feeling connected and known), immeasurability (e.g. knowing what a good day looks like) and irrelevance (e.g. doing something that matters and being connected to a purpose).

**Supporting capable and diverse people:** balancing skills, genders or points of view is believed to be essential to a high-performing team. People are generally seen as coachable, capable of managing themselves and already bringing their best selves to the job. It is then seen as the company's responsibility to support these people with a holistic perspective, which includes wellbeing and mental health.

**Clients as part of the collective:** with the benchmark of delivering value in every client interaction and helping them be successful, clients are involved in the agile transformation as well (e.g. training them in Agile), with the goal of building long-term relationships.

*"So, sometimes when you have a group of behaviours, there's a value behind them. And when you take it too far, they can be expressed negatively as well as positively. But the value still remains the same. And so from that, we were aiming for three values, and we ended up with four. And those are courage, responsibility, servant leadership, and manaakitanga. So, and we unpacked*

*those as well in terms of what they mean and the behaviours that we see at Boost and how they inform everything that we do” (Donaldson / 0:01:52).*

*“We have the scope: positive, lasting impacts. Our vision: we are where New Zealanders work, learn and play in a safe-to-fail environment” (Donaldson / 0:04:19).*

*“We're just going through the process of working out how you get to be a navigator at the moment, because initially it was about me identifying not just the people in the organisation, who were the right people, but also trying to get that balance of male and female and keep the balance of points of view around the table. So, we're not only the same person” (Donaldson / 0:18:17).*

*“Like, we try not to keep anything hidden at all because it's not useful. [...] So, try to be transparent as possible. [...] Everybody's supporting everyone else to be successful. There are no individual rewards because it's not an individual business” (Donaldson / 0:24:00).*

*“So, people don't have managers because they are capable of managing themselves” (Donaldson / 0:26:04).*

*“We tend to invest in long-term relationships. And, you know, make sure that we're delivering value every interaction we have. That's our goal, really, it's helping our clients to be successful” (Donaldson / 0:32:51).*

*“We're pretty, I guess, guarded, because we have worked really hard on the Boost culture. And so we're really kind of protective over that culture” (Foley / 0:20:49).*

*“And that's hungry, humble and smart. And smart in terms of people-smart and kind of self-aware as well” (Foley / 0:21:19).*

*“But it's also like raising people up, as well. So I think I'll read out the explanation in here because it just kind of shares it a bit better. [...] We make everyone feel welcome. We create an environment where everyone can be successful. We nurture relationships, raise others up and work to create and maintain safe spaces. So it's sort of a deeper level of hospitality, it's really nurturing” (Foley / 0:26:59).*

*“Or you can kind of support them in helping them get that help that they need and not making them feel uncomfortable about it” (Foley / 0:16:18).*

## Image of the human person

**People are valuable, resourceful, whole:** People are seen as valuable, resourceful (i.e. having answers within themselves), whole, and as such able to change. They are also believed to have good intentions and that they are doing the best they can within given circumstances.

**People value community:** People are believed to have a yearning for both community and collaboration, and that they want to feel welcome, be invited and share.

*“We see people as a valuable, resourceful and whole. We see people as having the answers to their own questions. We think that people can change, you know. [...] The idea that we're not born one way and are able to change completely” (Donaldson / 0:08:09).*

*“We trust that people are doing the best job they can do with the tools they've got. That they've got good intentions” (Donaldson / 0:22:34).*

*“Those foundational things of making people feel welcome, inviting them in and sharing with them, that kind of thing. Collaborating. There are things that we kind of yearn for” (Foley / 0:08:11).*

## Definition of leadership

**Coaching instead of management:** the organisation relies on coaches instead of managers, where every organisation member has an internal or external coach (including the CEO).

**Leadership team as servant leaders:** the leadership team (i.e. the *navigators*) makes sure that the strategy is being set collaboratively and is responsible for tracking it. They define themselves as servant leaders (and not command-and-control leaders) and come from a range of different roles backgrounds the organisation. The focus on service in place of status also extends to the lack of additional compensation for the role. Instead, they sign up for the role because of the extra growth opportunities, as the CEO acts as a coach to the leadership team. Diversity ensures a balanced leadership team (based for example on personality tests).

**Leadership by example:** Leaders are defined as being role models for the culture of the organisation, which for example includes that they work sensible hours. The CEO critically assesses his own leadership capabilities and

how they developed over time, and identifies himself as a major limiting factor for the company's growth. He nowadays is adamant about not being operationally involved and limits his own physical presence.

**Plans for elected Co-CEOs:** the founder and CEO's main goal is to make sure the organisation is in a better place when he leaves. Plans for this future include democratically elected Co-CEOs (male and female) and 100% employee shareholders.

*"And the navigators are there to make sure that we are executing on the strategy. So that we're following the direction that's been set and making our way through the map. [...] I suppose being in line with servant leaders rather than being command-and-control leaders. The job of the navigators is a service to the whole team. It's not top-down. It's where we've decided where we want to go. And the navigators are doing the job of making sure that we're on track to get there" (Donaldson / 0:03:18).*

*"The modelling you do as a leader is the culture that you get left with" (Donaldson / 0:11:24).*

*"We don't have any managers. We only have coaches" (Donaldson / 0:13:53).*

*"It was just rubbish, it was just terrible, I don't know how we got that far. You know, and I've still got a long way to go" (Donaldson / 0:16:19).*

*"They come from anywhere. So, our motto for the navigators is: Service, not status. You are there as a servant leader and a service to everybody else in the business. All the work is in addition to your other role, whatever that may be. And you don't get any additional money or benefits from being involved in the navigators. Everything you get is that I'm invested in your personal growth" (Donaldson / 0:18:16).*

*"And he was very quick to come back: I don't have a manager and I'm responsible to the team and to the client, and to the organisation" (Donaldson / 0:21:42).*

*"And so, you know, I'm leaving the business one way or another. I'll either find people to replace me in the leadership or I'll close down the business or I'll die on the job. But there's just no way to avoid leaving the post. And so I have to do the work to make sure that it's in a better place when I leave than it is now" (Donaldson / 0:39:31).*

*"I suppose a core belief is that I'm the main limiting factor for Boost. And so, a lot of this is about how do I remove my limiting the things I'm doing to limit Boost, so that Boost can grow and flourish. Because, you know, I'm the bottleneck really, my ability to learn and grow" (Donaldson / 0.42:09).*

*"So we've got a nice balance. No executors because we don't actually execute here, so that's fine. And everybody has different strengths" (Donaldson / 0:44:47).*

## Learning organisation

**Organisation centred around learning and growth:** People are considered resourceful beings that can learn their way forward. They however need to feel safe to learn and have to be able to set their own pace in learning. The organisation is consequently reported as being built around learning and growth. People are expected to take on responsibility for their own learning, as well as the organisation's learning. Creating a safe (i.e. safe-to-fail) environment is one of the organisation's main goals, deliberately drawing on complexity theory.

**Making learning visible:** the organisation has a R&D (i.e. research and development) day every fortnight, where the whole organisation engages in learning. Employees usually use R&D days to work together across teams (for cross-pollination) on skills sharing, learning new skills or developing methods for the organisation. The CEO sees himself and the leadership team as role models for learning, as they dedicate an hour per week to learning together. Instead of mistakes, the organisation uses the expression *learning moments*.

**Continuous improvement and learning by doing:** Learning is described to take place by experimenting in a safe-to-fail environment, using small iterations (for continuous improvement) and a flexible mindset. Frameworks and models act as tools and foster aha-moments, but are described as only showing one perspective and not the whole truth.

*"We are where New Zealanders work, learn and play in a safe-to-fail environment. And we're consciously using terms from things like complexity theory and, you know, safe-to-fail rather than fail-safe and all that. So everything that we do, very little of it, I would say is novel. It's all distilled from what we see is best practise currently. And we will do it until we find something else that is a better practise. Depending on whether we're in a complicated, complex, in an ordered or unordered environment" (Donaldson / 0:04:24).*

*“Because that's what people need to thrive here and we're very much a learning organisation. And we expect people to be responsible for their own learning. So. Well, we explicitly say: People are responsible for their learning and for the organisation's learning. So everyone has a responsibility to make sure that we are learning our way forward” (Donaldson / 0:06:50).*

*“We see people as having the answers to their own questions. We think that people can change, you know. [...] The idea that we're not born one way and are able to change completely” (Donaldson / 0:08:20).*

*“So, when we go through major changes or adopt new technologies, whether they be people technologies or technical technologies, we tend to try it first internally before we release it on our clients” (Donaldson / 0:12:46).*

*“And so I found myself thrust into the middle of an organisation which was all about learning and growth. And so that's where my journey of learning really started to accelerate” (Foley / 0:16:03).*

*“It's good to always check-in on what you're trying to achieve. You know, that there's no cognitive dissonance in the organisation” (Donaldson / 0:21:42).*

*“We realised, that in order for our clients to get the most out of us, we needed to be able to train them to be agile as well” (Donaldson / 0:30:00).*

*“I don't even really have an idea of what's going to be problematic. I think that's why we kind of do it, to find out, to learn our way forward. So, the only way we're really going to be able to learn about this is by doing it. And we will, as always, endeavour to make it safe-to-fail, so that as we fail, we can pick the learnings up from it, move forward in a slightly different way, not hold on to things too tightly” (Donaldson / 0:37:53).*

*“We talk about learning moments. Not mistakes” (Donaldson / 0:45:20).*

*“So, that was great feedback. And so we'll be able to now put that into place for the next dev[eloper] that starts. So, it's always ongoing” (Foley / 0:47:22).*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Own working experience:** the founder and CEO shared how he wanted to create an organisation that was radically different from what he had



experienced as an employee, which was an unproductive and unhealthy environment with extremely long work hours.

**Failed attempts of copying others:** failed attempts to copy other companies led to the realisation that aligning operations with culture is essential.

*“My first job out of university, doing kind of the same stuff, but 25 years ago. It was just rubbish, really. At one stage I'd worked 12 hours a day for 90 days straight. And it wasn't that I didn't enjoy it. It's just that looking at it, it was completely unproductive. Like, it was just dumb” (Donaldson / 0:10:24).*

Framing
Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Organisational theory:** Complexity theory is mentioned several times in regard to creating a safe-to-fail environment. Democratic or freedom-centred organisations are also referred to when explaining the association with WorldBlu organisations.

**Team dynamics:** Patrick Lencioni's concept of *the ideal team player* is used as a basic model for understanding team dynamics and dysfunctions.

**Communication:** Susan Scott's *decision tree* is brought up in relation to delegating decision-making, while Gary Chapman's five love languages are used as a general concept to understand different communication styles.

**Self-awareness:** Brené Brown's concept of *vulnerability and shame* is introduced when talking about fostering self-awareness in individuals.

**Personality profile:** the Gallup CliftonStrengths *strengths finder* is used as an assessment tool.

*“And that was really the start of the journey of becoming more intentional about being a better organisation for people. Because before we were doing and trying stuff and there was no framework to, sort of, work around. It was very hard to tell what was working and what wasn't. [...] And there have been lots of Aha-moments along the way. And there have been tons of mistakes made and learning” (Donaldson / 0:14:41).*

*“All the tools that we use, they're only ever a view of the world. They're not the truth or anything like that” (Donaldson / 0:43:44).*

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

**Separate roles:** HR, office manager and admin are seen as separate roles.

### Salary / Finances

**Move towards transparent salaries:** Salary bands are tied to seniority levels and salaries will be set by three people going forward. These are first steps towards full salary transparency, according to the CEO.

*“We’ve got salary bands for each of those. And this is all part of the work we’ve done to try and move towards transparent salaries. So, that I’m not the only one that knows what everybody else is earning. But there’ll be a team of three team members that will set salaries” (Donaldson / 0:45:24).*

### Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Time with the company as transformational:** the company wants to hire people for whom joining the organisation will be transformational. Delivering value for the company and its clients is then simply seen as a natural consequence of that.

**Finding candidates limits growth:** Finding suitable candidates is described as a limiting factor to the company's growth plans. The hiring process is also reported as being rather lengthy, due to the company being very protective of its culture.

**Culture fit over technical skills:** Personality traits and a candidate’s alignment with the company’s purpose and vision is ranked over pure technical skills. Introducing values throughout the hiring process is used as a tool to ensure cultural fit. Testing for values is done through asking questions.

**Criteria for candidates:** Criteria include being *humble*, *hungry* and *smart* (i.e. the framework of the *ideal team player*), whereas smart refers to being self-aware and people-savvy. Strong team player skills and emotional intelligence are equally important for all roles, as there is an overall high level of interaction. Technical skills can be slightly different depending on the role and are assessed e.g. by asking potential coaches to give a lightning talk or a potential developer to complete an online coding challenge.

**Collaborative hiring process:** after sending in their resumé, the first direct contact with potential candidates is a short phone chat with the HR. While the first screening is always done by HR, the people involved during the next steps may change depending on the role. The goal is to involve as much of the team throughout the hiring process as possible, as it is deemed vital that the team chooses itself who it is going to be working with. Radically new hiring approaches are also considered for experimenting with in the near future (e.g. team challenges for candidates), but only after the person responsible for HR (who is new to field) feels comfortable with the existing process.

*“Essentially, we have a number of frameworks that we use to determine whether someone's going to thrive at Boost. What we want is not someone who's going to fit in or someone who's going to do a good job, but we want someone for whom coming to Boost is going to be transformational for their life” (Donaldson / 0:05:27).*

*“When we're recruiting, we're looking for someone who's humble, hungry and smart, who shares our values and whose purpose and vision aligns, broadly speaking, with our purpose and vision. This the ideal person. And then, generally speaking, we can help them get the technical skills to where they need to be” (Donaldson / 0:06:34).*

*“We are growing. We're trying to grow. But it's hard to find the people that are going to thrive here” (Donaldson / 0:32:01).*

*“And that's hungry, humble and smart. And smart in terms of people-smart and kind of self-aware as well. Not like intellectual” (Foley / 0:20:44).*

*“I don't always choose the questions in advance when I'm talking to the person. [...] I ask them questions that might prompt more conversation and you can kind of get a feel of like... Yes. I think this person could be a good team fit for us. That's one area that I think about when we're even just doing the initial phone chat” (Foley / 0:23:22).*

*“If people don't write a cover letter, I'm not even looking at their resumé. Because for me, if you haven't taken the time to look at the job, or look at Boost...” (Foley / 0:24:36).*

*“I always like if people, if you actually talk about something that we value or that you looked up on a blog post” (Foley / 0:25:12).*

*“That's something that I'm thinking about. How can I ask those questions or figure out from when we meet someone if they're going to fit with those values? [...] Generally, I feel like, if you have those values, they will just shine out from you. You can't hide that” (Foley / 0:25:52).*

*“As much as we can, we like to involve more of the team because everyone's going to work with that person. It's not just me. It's important that the dev[eloper]s choose who they're gonna work with. Because if I'm the HR person and I have this much connection with that person throughout the day and they're not a great person to work with... That's not right for the team” (Foley / 0:29:38).*

*“It's an idea from a company in America called Menlo Innovations. And they have quite a unique recruitment process where they do like things like: a whole heap of people come in and they get them to buddy up with each other. And part of the recruitment process is that they need to get their team mate up to the next level. [...] That style of recruitment. We thought about doing that. [...] And I'm so new to this. I haven't ever hired anybody in a normal way. Can we please do some of that so I can kind of get a feel for the baseline? And then we can kind of develop some” (Foley / 0:49:38).*

## **On- / Offboarding**

**Employer of choice for the right people:** truly caring for people as such also means that they might benefit from not being with the company (or not anymore), according to the CEO. The company thus does not strive to be the everyone's preferred employer, but wants to be the employer of choice for the people who will profit most from being with them.

**Celebrations and networking:** new employees receive a personalised gift basket before they start and are celebrated with a team lunch within the first few days. They also are given a company handbook as part of the onboarding process. Coffee chats with the CEO and employees across the organisation (especially with employees they might not have any interaction with otherwise) are supposed to kick-start relationship-building. New employees also complete a strength finder test to both raise their self-awareness and allow the team to get a grasp of their skills.

**Onboarding mentor and retrospectives:** an onboarding mentor supports them during their first time with the company. Onboarding reviews with the HR role holder take place after the first, second and third month. These reviews include feedback from the new employees' coach and team on how

they are settling in, and are also viewed as an opportunity to obtain feedback on the onboarding process and what could be improved for the next hire.

*“The idea of: you can't really be interacting with someone unless you have love for them. Because otherwise it's just disingenuous. [...] Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that there's a place for them in the organisation. Because if you really care about some people, then they're better somewhere else, because they're going to thrive somewhere else. You know, we're not for everyone” (Donaldson / 0:08:38).*

*“And it's also great, growing your network. Yes. And then people get more comfortable with that kind of thing” (Donaldson / 0:35:36).*

## Development / Performance

**Work as a holistic, transformational experience:** Working with the company should transform employees holistically, supporting them in reaching their full potential.

**Responsibility for individual and collective learning:** Employees are described as being responsible for both their own learning and the organisational learning. Accordingly, the organisation is built around the concept of learning and growing, yet depends on individuals proactively engaging in learning activities, based on their individual needs. Organisational rituals such as the fortnightly company-wide R&D day emphasise the importance of learning. The leadership team also engages in an hour-long learning session led by the CEO every week, with an emphasis on soft skills alongside general business topics. The organisation also uses strength finder tests as a tool for assessing both individual strength as well as skills distribution within a team.

**Coaches instead of managers:** every employee has an in-house or external coach, with whom they meet for fortnightly coaching sessions (approximately 30 minutes). Coaches are self-selected roughly twice a year. However, coachee numbers are limited per coach. Coaching sessions may include the employee's contribution to the company culture, team dynamics, personal goals or other topics, as they are tailored to the individual person's needs. Coaching is described as potentially helping employees to deal with complexity in the workplace, e.g. to decide what a successful day looks like, how they can track that and how they can feel connected to a purpose, be recognised and build relationships. One-on-one coaching sessions might also be used to incorporate regular feedback.

**No performance reviews:** the organisation relies on timely and direct feedback and therefore refrains from doing periodic performance reviews. Individual performance issues that may arise are dealt with directly, for which the HR role holder is accountable. Otherwise, the company focuses on the economic performance of the whole business and not on individual performance, as mutual support and collaboration are deemed vital for the organisation's success (and a focus on individual recognition is deemed as potentially detrimental to that).

**Seniority levels instead of job titles:** the organisation works with levels of maturity or seniority (i.e. Apprentice, Junior, Master), but otherwise has no formal titles.

*"And so they're going to be able to stay or leave, but go away, essentially, a better person" (Donaldson / 0:05:45).*

*"We explicitly say: People are responsible for their learning and for the organisation's" (Donaldson / 0:07:27).*

*"And I suppose we try to do things with love in our heart. The idea of: you can't really be interacting with someone unless you have love for them. Because otherwise it's just disingenuous. So, at every stage we're asking ourselves: do you have love for that person? When we're talking about performance management, you can only do that from caring about that person, you know, as the starting place" (Donaldson / 0:08:38).*

*"We don't need to tell people to work harder. That's not necessary. They're already doing as much as they can. So, what we do, as coaches, we work with them to understand what their needs are and where they want to go. And then we put in place a support and learning programme around that" (Donaldson / 0:22:44).*

*"No interest in performance reviews. Because the thing about performance reviews, you see someone once every six months, at best, a year, if you're lucky, longer than that at worst. And then people tell you, you did something wrong six months ago. Or they just tell you that something you did a week ago was good" (Donaldson / 0:25:00).*

*"Because everyone's got their own individual learning needs. So, it really becomes a sum of the parts, more than giving everybody the same thing. So, there's an element of individualisation. And the most effective learning that I've seen is when people go out and get what they need. Rather than sit back*

*and wait for things to be delivered to them. And so that's what we encourage. [...] Though, that said, we do have a day a fortnight which is research and development for the whole team. So, we only work nine days a fortnight for clients. 10% of our time's research and development, and that's teams working together with each other to learn stuff, generally speaking" (Donaldson / 0:33:48).*

*"Nobody really has a job title, but we do have an idea of the stages you go through" (Donaldson / 0:45:24).*

*"But most of the time it's just a chance for people to kind of chat about how the team's going. Any worries they've had. That's also a time where people are like: oh, let's talk about a pay rise or something like that. That's also another opportunity for people to discuss those things. [...] For me, when I go into doing a one-on-one with someone, I have some things that are written down. I've kind of done a bit of research: last time we talked about this. And we may not use any of that stuff. It just really depends on where that person's at, at the time" (Foley / 0:14:50).*

*"One's immeasurability, which is the one that's the hardest one to measure, because people don't always know or have a way of tracking that they've done well that day. So they go home feeling shitty because they're like: I didn't get this done. But that each person has actually their own measure of what's a good day, to them, and it's gonna be different for everybody" (Foley / 018:53).*

*"And it's a lot more: pushing you. And thinking about different options. He's always got homework for us. [...] And for a little stage, I've kind of gotten too busy, but for a little while there, I actually asked Lauren, who is also a one-on-one coach, to be my other coach, because I found that I just need to be held accountable" (Foley / 0:51:33).*

## Communication / Feedback

**Transparent communication and information:** Company information, such as the sales pipeline or profits, is openly accessible to all employees. Hiding this information is expressed as not being useful for the organisation.

**Direct and on-demand feedback:** individual coaching sessions are seen as a chance to include regular (also multi-directional) feedback. More in-depth personal feedback is available via so-called *feedback futons*, where employees nominate three co-workers they would like to receive feedback from (approx. 15 minutes around three simple questions).

**No formal reviews:** 360° performance reviews have been trialled in the past. However, they were perceived as a way of by-passing the need for ongoing and direct conversations.

*“We try not to keep anything hidden at all because it's not useful” (Donaldson / 0:24:00)*

*“And it's just became really clear really quickly that they [i.e. performance reviews] were just a crutch for people not having conversations and not caring about each other” (Donaldson / 0:25:28).*

*“And it's a great way for people to take care of their own feedback. By taking the ownership of when they want to receive that feedback” (Foley / 0:43:51).*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Small teams:** Teams that are delivering the actual work range between two to six people, as smaller teams are deemed more effective.

**Leadership team:** the leadership team is responsible to track the execution of the (collaboratively set) strategy. Employees can express their interest to be a part of the leadership team.

**Non-operative CEO:** the CEO characterises his role as looking after the leadership team as well as the strategic needs of the organisation. He is not involved in any operational or day-to-day matters.

*“And then I put together the navigators and that went through a number of iterations until we had the structure we have in place now. And what my role in the businesses is, is to grow them as people. So they are my team that I work for, the team I work on. I don't do anything operationally in the business at all. [...] All I do is look at the strategic needs of the organisation and work to grow the navigators as individuals” (Donaldson / 0:16:46).*

### Self-concept of HR / People management

**HR role holder has different roles:** the person responsible for HR holds various roles. She also sees her diverse background as an advantage, as it brings different perspectives to the role.



**Values embedded in practices:** the HR role holder started about a year ago with no previous HR experience. However, she describes the company as having strong practices in place and values embedded in those practices, which made her transition into HR a lot easier.

**Tasks and topics:** the HR role holder describes her purpose as seeing people's talents and nurturing them, while making everyone feel welcome and comfortable. The role itself includes informal (e.g. pastoral care) and formal (e.g. coaching sessions) tasks. Topics include recruiting, onboarding, performance management, coaching and team support. The role of HR in this context is described as facilitating and supporting other.

*"I feel like I've been pedalling a little and I haven't really invested a lot of time in terms of learning about HR. I don't have a HR hat that I know how to put on or anything. But I feel like Boost has a lot of practices and things that are embedded into how we do things. That those, kind of, HR practices come out naturally" (Foley / 0:00:00).*

*"I have many hats. Backgrounds. [...] I have a varied background. [...] I think that it helps me. In lots of different ways. One thing I find is, like, not ever underestimating what people can bring to the table. And it doesn't matter what role they're in" (Foley / 0:5:12).*

*"I think I'm really good at seeing people's talents and I love nurturing those things" (Foley / 0:07:17).*

*"It kind of depends on what you want to put underneath that [HR] bracket" (Foley / 0:10:33).*

*"So, it's sort of like hospitality. But it's also like raising people up, as well. [...] We make everyone feel welcome. We create an environment where everyone can be successful. We nurture relationships, raise others up and work to create and maintain safe spaces. So it's that deeper level of hospitality, it's really nurturing... When you're in my role, or the agile coach role, those values have to be very, very strong. Because in a way, you are kind of leading. It's servant leadership, but it's still in a leading role, when you're kind of coaching people" (Foley / 0:26:59).*

## Decision-making capacity

**Avoiding bottlenecks:** the CEO sees himself as the limiting factor and bottleneck for the company's growth and flourishing, and therefore is adamant about not being operationally involved.

**Leadership team meetings open:** all employees are invited to take part in leadership team meetings. Only HR issues are not openly discussed for both legal and ethical reasons.

**Limited interest in leadership role:** there is only very limited interest in taking on a leadership role, which is presumed to be due to the high degree of responsibility for the success of the business.

*“The only stuff we're not completely transparent about is HR stuff. So, if there's an HR issue we need to deal with, we would ask the person observing to leave the room, just legally, you can't really. And that's kind of ethical as” well, right (Donaldson / 0:19:52)?*

## 4.2. CerebralFix

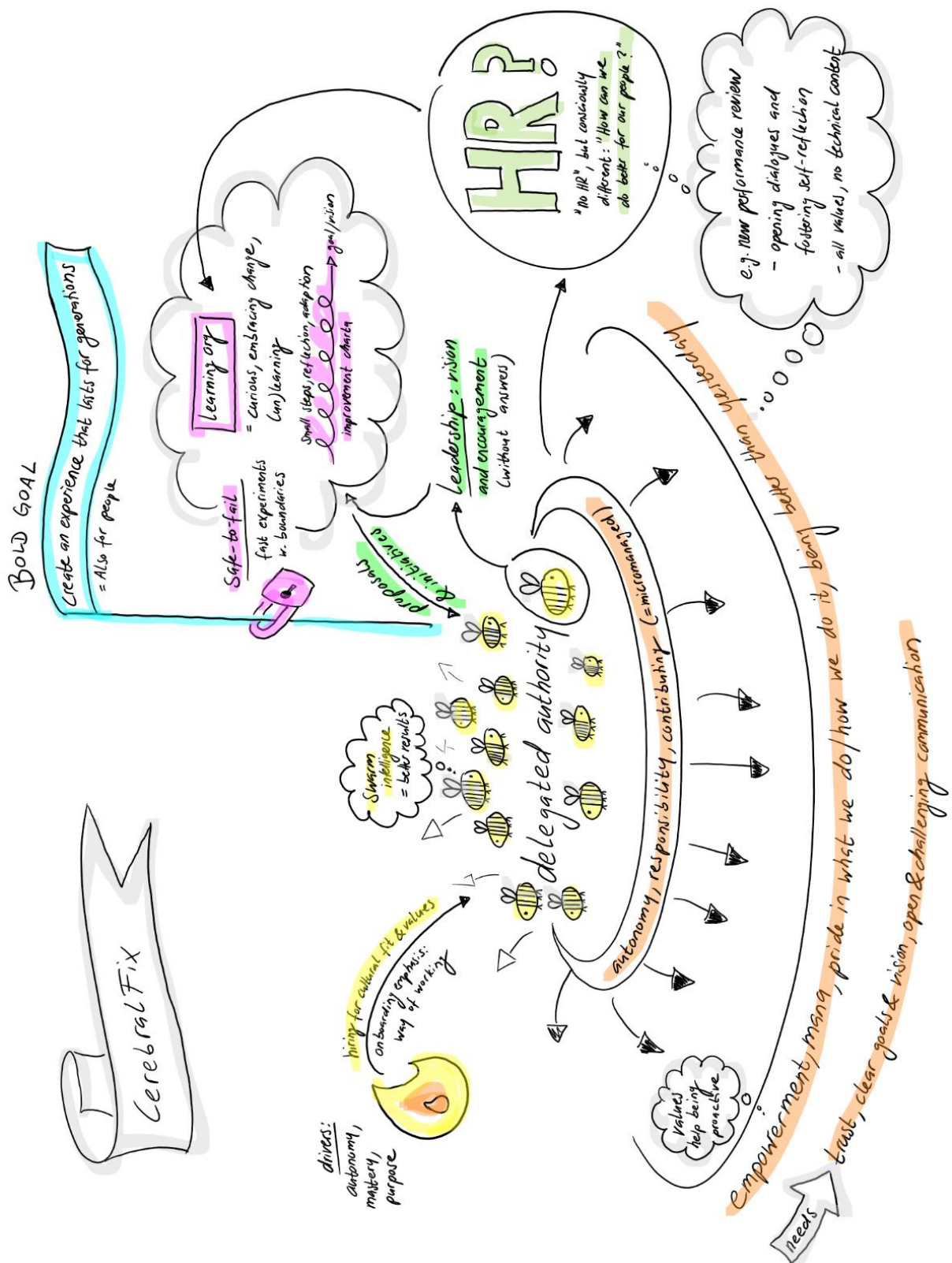


Figure 14 Concept map: Cerebral Fix  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Swarm intelligence:** the organisational culture is shaped by inclusiveness and sharing. There is a strong belief in the power of the collective, e.g. by involving more people in the sales process to identify risks earlier and get better estimates, solely because more people are thinking of different aspects.

*“We're going to just get more people involved in it. [...] You know, so estimates are more correct because we've got more people just feeding into the process. Hopefully we're identifying risks better because we've got more people thinking about different aspects of it” (Thorne / 0:09:27).*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Vision of create an experience that lasts for generations:** the company's ultimate dream is to create their own games, hence creating lasting experiences. Equally, this applies to the employee experience, where the company is striving to make an impact. All changes and initiatives are always centred around the question how they might benefit the people.

**Pragmatism:** not taking yourself too seriously is a guiding principle for the organisation. What the company does is not a matter of life or death, which means employees should not treat it like it was.

**Focus on values, behaviours and motivators:** clear values support the organisation in being more proactive in its decision-making. The organisation is confident that following certain values and exhibiting certain behaviours will automatically result in high-performing employees. These behaviours include for example: asking for help, continuous learning, being open to feedback, trusting others or accepting responsibility. Thus, the focus has shifted away from pure technical skills. The main drivers for employees are identified as striving for mastery, purpose and autonomy. As a result, the work environment should be enjoyable and stimulating. The company consequently seeks people who are drawn to this way of working.

**Empowerment and *manaakitanga*:** the organisation is convinced that empowering all employees and giving them a voice translate directly into financial success. *Manaakitanga* (a concept from Māori culture) summarises being respectful to each other, but also to yourself, taking pride in what you do and how you do it, and that aspiring to be better than yesterday. Both

values include learning, sharing and continuous improvement (while being empowered to do so yourself, thus using everyone's full potential).

**Small steps towards a big goal:** Empowering people is described as sharing clear goals and a vision, without being too prescriptive about the way. Conditions to this way of working are a strong sense of mutual trust and open communication. The latter includes the ability to be challenged as a way to learn in an autonomous environment. As a result, the company relies on small experiments and increments towards a bigger goal, while clear measures and frequent retrospectives maximise learning.

*"It's always been our dream to create our own games. [...] Which is: create an experience that lasts for generations. That's our top goal" (Thorne / 0:02:52).*

*"And at first, I didn't realise how important those values would actually become to how we run our business" (Thorne / 0:04:11).*

*"So, being respectful of each other, but also ourselves. Taking pride in how we do things. It's quite related to, you know, being good to people, so being respectful to people, making sure that we're just aware of each other and ready to help out. And just taking pride in what we do and how we do it. So, being good to people both internally and externally. Being better than we were yesterday. So, talking about the learning organisation that we wanted to become, or that I wanted us to become, sharing and making things" (Thorne / 0:04:42).*

*"Making sure everyone has the opportunity to contribute" (Thorne / 0:11:23).*

*"We feel that everyone feels they are valued and has a voice in the company" (Thorne / 0:14:43).*

*"And everyone trusts each other to have their back in delivering the next step. So, quite touchy-feely" (Thorne / 0:15:03).*

*"If you're doing these things, like, you're asking for helping, you're seeking out new knowledge, then you're going to be great at what you do. Rather than kind of go: are you great at what you do? Tech-wise. People will be awesome because they're doing these things. They are willing to help out when and however they can. Being open to feedback. Trusting others. Accepting responsibility for their mistakes" (Thorne / 0:21:46).*

*“But so many companies are in that 20th century hierarchy. You have to work your way up. You've got your line manager. You don't have a chance to see something that's broken or could be improved. And jump in and do it. Or there's a reason that that's the way it is. Probably because it's always been that way. And so, you lose out on so much goodness. [...] Our guys, you know, you might be hired as a developer. You'll do so much more than that, like, a lot of our team, you know, will be scrum masters and stuff as well. [...] You sort of lean into so many different areas. You're not constricted by just the role that you are hired for. Which I think goes a long way as well” (Thorne / 0:35:56).*

*“What is the benefit or the value proposition in terms of, not: how will our company make more profits? It's: how does this benefit our people? [...] I guess the benefit to our people is the benefit that the company gets out of it” (Thorne / 0:40:06).*

*“At the end of the day, we make games. It's not life or death. What we're doing. We really shouldn't be taking ourselves too seriously. [...] We're good at what we do and we're professionals. We really like doing a good job. But we shouldn't be killing our staff to make some games. Which is something that our industry is really bad at” (Thorne / 0:52:54).*

*“When we asked: do you feel you have a voice in everything? We now have people saying: Yes. And we're like: Yes. OK. We're getting somewhere. And it is translating into financial success” (Thorne / 1:00:37).*

*“And you've got to empower your people. You've got to really trust them and they've got to have a clear line of sight and vision. And actually you can't be too prescriptive either about how you get to that. You've just got to keep on. It's the direction that counts. [...] But your people have got to know what they're doing. Because if you're working on a level down here and not knowing what you're trying to achieve as a company, then you're never going to succeed” (Edwards / 0:00:01).*

*“Mastery, purpose, autonomy. Those are the things that drive us. Why do we come to work? Why do we do these things? Because it's got to be enjoyable. You've got to enjoy the people you work with. You spend more time at work than you do with your family, who you love and all of those things. Yet we spend more time with the people we work with. And so, creating an environment that's enjoyable and stimulating is critical for me in achieving efficiencies. Because I believe as a team, you've got to have very clear goals of what you're trying to do. You've got to trust people in order to do that. And you've got to be very good at communication. The trust is a two-way thing, it's*

*that you've got to trust people to see the vision. But you've also got to trust that they communicate what they're doing towards that vision. So, you can question things. You should be able to question issues along the way" (Edwards / 0:02:43).*

*"And concepts like radical candour and meritocracy. Those things where you need to be challenged, you need to have your say" (Edwards / 0:08:44).*

*"And it's that ability that you need to be able to challenge people. [...] Not take it as an insult. But take it as: I can learn from this experience. So that when you get autonomy and you're challenged about it, it's challenging in the right way" (Edwards / 0:09:11).*

### **Image of the human person**

**Catering for a new generation:** the organisation is built around the values of the millennial generation who wants to have a voice and develop their full potential without being exploited. In this context, motivation is drawn on autonomy, mastery and purpose. The company also acknowledges that while all employees are committed and dedicated, they might also have passions outside of their work life or might be content with their current role – not all employees have to be extremely driven in the workplace.

*"They want a say in things. They want to have input. They're really clever" (Thorne / 0:35:28).*

*"There are people, their passions lie outside of work, they come to work to do a job and get some money. And that is so totally fair enough. Like, the businesses that are always trying to just milk the last drop of blood out of there... [...] These people do a fantastic job and they're usually the calmer ones" (Thorne / 0:51:56).*

*"It doesn't appeal to everybody. It appeals to the organisations that I want to be in. [...] I probably only want to be in organisations that work like this [...]. I'm not a millennial, but it's that millennial generation" (Edwards / 0:44:51).*

### **Definition of leadership**

**Leading by example:** Leading by example for instance means sharing knowledge instinctively or that everyone in the team is asked to contribute to the general manager's performance review.



**Inspirational leadership:** there are only a number of areas yet where the team is willing to take over complete ownership and a lot of employees still regularly seek validation for their decisions. For the most part, employees signalled that they still like having leaders who are responsible for starting initiatives on which they can then collaborate on. Leadership is thus defined as being inspirational, driving the vision forward and shaping the culture. At the same time, leaders do not have a roadmap how to reach those goals and make this very explicit, which is seen as innovative in a working world where managers are often expected to have all the answers ready.

**Everyone has leadership qualities:** everyone in the organisation has leadership qualities, as they at the very least take ownership of their own tasks. Accordingly, leadership qualities are a part of all performance reviews.

*“I do my own performance review with everyone in the studio as well. So, everyone can contribute. [...] hopefully leading by example” (Thorne / 0:24:51).*

*“I think people like having leaders as well, which is something that has surprised me. [...] Some things they might kind of say: we've got all of this now. We're happy. But in general it seems people enjoy working with Tim and I on initiatives rather than taking hold of it themselves” (Thorne / 0:31:36).*

*“With an organisation, you need a sense of leadership and someone to drive the direction” (Edwards / 0:10:52).*

*“Guys, I don't know how to get there. But that's what we've got to do. How are we going to do this? [...] You know, it's like, I don't have a roadmap for you” (Edwards / 0:39:38).*

## Learning organisation

**Learning as a strategy:** the goal was to create an organisation where people are curious, want to learn and embrace change. Leading by example applies to this area as well, leaders share information and knowledge openly and encourage others to do the same. Different communication channels support different aspects of organisational learning (e.g. information sharing, knowledge base, collaboration, casual idea sharing). Constant learning loops are aimed at maximising customer insights and are enabled by technology. Understanding more about the customer is at the core of self-organisation, as the teams autonomously manage this information and adapt accordingly. The ability to unlearn is just as crucial: What has worked some time ago might no longer be relevant today.



**Continuous improvement in a safe-to-fail environment:** Action is determined by vision, setting a bold goal and identifying the next step towards that goal. Measurable criteria and constant reflection then help to determine whether you are on track. As a result, the organisation is ever-changing, in a constant loop of inspection and adaption towards shared goals. A safe-to-fail environment is defined as a space where people can experiment within clear boundaries and are allowed to fail. This is seen as a tool to avoid repeating mistakes across the company. Making mistakes is not seen as an issue, whereas trying the same approach over and over again and expecting a different result certainly is. Running small experiments allows to identify risks earlier, which ultimately increases profit with the same number of staff.

**Delegated authority:** initially, a lot of employees struggled with the agile transformation, as it meant both a cultural and a behavioural shift. This shift entailed the maxim to work and think autonomously, learn self-directed and feel comfortable with failing publicly. This was contradictory to the previous work-experience of many employees, which included being micro-managed on a daily basis. The company uses the concept of delegated authority as a framework to ensure every employee is being heard and able to contribute, which is a long-term process of calibrating the needs of the organisation and the team members. Change initiatives driven by the leadership team make sure to involve the employees every step of the way, as they only get implemented once the whole team agrees.

*“So, that just gave us another mandate, which is great. [...] We then actually broke it down. [...] What does that actually even mean? And so putting success criteria, things that we could measure, in place” (Thorne / 0:08:05).*

*“What actions are we going to take to try and change things. And we're going to measure that and we're going to report back on it and we're going to inspect it down the line” (Thorne / 0:08:55).*

*“That safe-to-fail environment is such a huge thing. Something I learned, when we were bringing in Agile in the first place: no one likes change, even change that will make things better. So, the way that I went about this was very, in a safe way, going: we're going to try this, and we're gonna get your feedback. Like, we don't have to do this. This is a suggestion or proposal. And OK, let's try it for a week and we'll come back and we'll just see if everyone's happy with it. So, making it hopefully easier to do that” (Thorne / 0:13:32).*

*“Because they saw it each step of the way as well. Rather than just rolling it out and then seeing it. [...] They were involved in the process the whole way as*

*well. And we got it to a point like: yeah, we think we can do this. And we rolled it out” (Thorne / 0:24:16).*

*“I set out to basically create a learning organisation and hopefully, you know, an organisation where we’re curious, we're wanting to learn and we're embracing the potential for change” (Thorne / 0:56:29).*

*“Because a lot of the time I have no idea how to do... [...] You know, we don't have the answers. For these things. [...] And that's what delegated authority kind of tells us. It's like: People do want to have a say in this. So you figure out how they can have a say in this” (Thorne / 0:58:21).*

*“This was about eight years ago. And there were many people: I fucking hate Agile, bloody rubbish! And some of the biggest people who hated it at the time are now the biggest believers in it. But some people will fight against it. And it's quite a difficult thing to bring into an organisation, because cultural change and behavioural change are quite different. I use the analogy of: you're trying to lead these people to this better way of working, where it's more autonomous, it's more people are thinking for themselves and more self-directed learning, that you can give them a problem and then not have to micromanage that problem. [...] But when you've been working in a very micromanaged, task-driven approach, it's quite difficult for some people to come out of that approach, where they're being told what to do every day, to having to think what to do. [...] So here's the analogy of chickens in battery farms. They let them loose. Go on, go and be free. And then all the chickens are rushing back in the cage” (Edwards / 0:05:12).*

*“You know, the old-style manager: shut down making mistakes! But they're mistakes that you made previously. But people need to learn. You need to learn as you're going along. [...] There's the concept of safe-to-fail, the training stuff that's safe-to-fail, that you've got boundaries. [...] So the Cynefin framework is a problem-solving framework. And it breaks down into four quadrants. And I use this lot to determine how we solve the... And a lot of things you can't overanalyse, you need to do within. So you've got to experiment, you've got to try stuff. Because otherwise, you just get into a paralysis-by-analysis approach. [...] We're just learning. [...] Because we don't know. Let's just try this” (Edwards / 0:12:19).*

*“As a behaviour for an organisation, you need to be happy that people can experiment and try stuff and fail. [...] I constantly tell people to be brave and to challenge themselves. And don't be afraid of failure. Be afraid of making the same mistake twice. [...] Don't be afraid of trying something. But you've got to*

*do it within boundaries and identify what your boundaries are” (Edwards / 0:14:41).*

*“We've created a framework where we hypothesise stuff. We run the experiments, we learn from those. Feedback. And then start again. [...] But those are really important to us, because we need to learn what works and what doesn't work” (Edwards / 0:16:19).*

*“Let's try it quickly. And so we've built tools in the software development process that allow us to try things. If it's not good, then we'll just rewrite it. [...] But when we try it, we try it on a small cohort, and we learn from it. If it works, we'll amplify that learning. If it's not good, then we get rid of it. But we do it quickly” (Edwards / 0:16:52).*

*“I do it instinctively and I try and encourage people to put lots of information out there. And then if people are interested, they can snack on that information” (Edwards / 0:17:48).*

*“So we've got clear measures of what we're trying to do and how we achieve those. [...] It's based on the improvement charta approach, that you need to take small steps towards a bigger goal. But you've got to have that bigger goal in mind” (Edwards / 0:21:05).*

*“Try stuff out. If you try the same thing, expecting a different result, then that's bad, that's stupid. If you don't learn from it. But it's always good to learn” (Edwards / 0:38:34).*

*“Understanding what's actually happening. Getting close to what's going on. It's getting feedback. You need feedback. It's all about feedback. [...] You've got to learn. But the thing is, these things we can learn at speed. And with the technology we've got, we can try so many things to get feedback, understanding players, behaviour and what they want. We've got to understand what need are we fulfilling by building this thing? What are we doing” (Edwards / 0:41:15)?*

*“And the interesting thing as well: what worked a year ago may not work now, because it's an evolving time. And so that's the barrier, these things that you need to unlearn, you need to go: that was great then. [...] But it's got to be relevant for what you're trying to do at this point in time” (Edwards / 0:42:25).*

Motivation
Drivers / Aha-moments

**Company history and outside inspiration:** Employees were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with what felt like vague and repetitive top-down communication on challenges such as rapid scaling up or down or misalignment between workload and resources. This ultimately led to a realisation of the fragile state the organisation was in. As a result, the leadership team came to the conclusion that it was time for the company to invest in solid foundations to then being able to build the company back up. Around the same time, two members of the leadership team took part in a lean workshop and could draw on that as a source of inspiration.

*"We're ten years old now. [...] And it's just a really fragile and uncertain future. [...] I was thinking how fragile our company was" (Thorne / 0:00:30).*

*"What we needed to do was start again, just kind of start again, build in some foundational processes that we could build a successful company on top of" (Thorne / 0:01:52).*

*"You know, we've heard this before. It's vague. What do you even mean by this? So, you know, people were very unsure, bitter about all the times we've been through this" (Thorne / 00:06:53).*

Framing
Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Learning organisation:** Peter Senge's concept about how to build a learning organisation (in a book called "The Fifth Discipline") is mentioned alongside Barry O'Reilly's book (called "Unlearn: Let Go of Past Success to Achieve Extraordinary Results") about innovation by unlearning, and Dave Snowden's *Cynefin* framework to categorise problems according to their complexity.

**Delegated authority:** the company uses the methodology of *Delegation Poker* by Jurgen Appelo (a card game to facilitate delegation of decision-making).

**Motivation theory:** the human motivators identified by Dan Pink (in *Drive*) are used to explain major drivers of human behaviour, i.e. mastery, purpose, autonomy.

**Communication:** Kim Scott's book (called *Radical Candor*) is referred to in regard to creating an honest feedback culture.

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

*No data*

### Salary / Finances

**Salary bands tied to contribution:** Salaries are based on an individual's contribution to the company (and not for example experience). The emphasis shifts from individual learning to a team focus through to offering guidance for others and rolling out strategies across the company.

**Full salary transparency as a goal:** the leadership team aims for completely transparent salaries, whereas 77% of employees are ready to at least move to transparent salary bands. This is seen as enough concern for the leadership team to postpone this endeavour to better articulate their goal.

*"As part of the salary proposal, one of the proposals was: let's go full transparency. And because there was enough push back we didn't go ahead with it yet. [...] There was enough concern in the people that were pushing back. [...] OK. Before we go through this, let's better articulate why we're doing it. Get more input from the wider studios" (Thorne / 0:44:59).*

### Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Hiring for cultural fit and values:** Hiring the right people is believed to be the key to create the kind of environment where people enjoy working, thus leading to cultural fit and alignment of values as the main criteria. To decide a potential fit, questions about delivering values to the customer are viewed as just as important as a general gut feeling.

**Recruiting done by CTO:** at the beginning of the journey towards delegated authority, all recruiting activities shifted to the teams. In recent iterations, recruiting has been handed back to the CTO.

*"And in our hiring process now, we hire for culture and values and for people who we believe will fit in" (Edwards / 0:06:56).*

*"It's not about the size of the organisation. It's about leadership and the psyche of people coming in as well, bringing the right people in" (0:26:21).*

## On- / Offboarding

**Way of working:** during onboarding, a major focus is placed on the company's culture and own way of working.

*"I used to call it my brainwashing when people were coming in: this is our way of working, it's great isn't it" (Edwards / 0:08:04)?*

## Development / Performance

**Autonomy may be challenging:** the company's autonomous and self-directed way of working can be challenging for employees that may have solely worked in a tightly managed command-and-control structure with a task-driven approach. Having a coaching relationship with employees, characterised by informal chats and discussions, as well as sharing mistakes, may empower them to take on more responsibility.

**Skills management tied to vision:** a clear understanding of the common vision and the next steps as a company may help to identify the skills needed for delivery. It also should prevent having to upskill employees on short notice.

**Overhauled performance reviews:** the performance reviews the company used to have were deemed as simply ticking boxes without adding any real value. They were overhauled completely and now are solely aimed at opening up dialogues and fostering self-reflection. Instead of technical abilities, they are centred around values. It is believed that if individuals live up to these values (i.e. asking for help, seeking new knowledge, willing to help, be open to feedback, trusting others, accepting responsibility for mistakes) then they are thriving at what they do anyway. The new performance reviews include self-reflection, feedback from four peers (chosen by the receiver) and feedback from the leadership team. The performance reviews also serve as a tool to explore the need for company-wide training.

*"First, we all have to get on the same page as in terms of what's expected of us and what to expect of each other" (Thorne / 0:15:55).*

*"You left and you had nothing from that. [...] It would just be ticking the box" (Thorne / 0:17:10).*

*"So there is nothing in our performance reviews about your technical ability. [...] It's all about those values. [...] My thought behind this when I proposed it was: if you're doing these things, like, I need help, you're asking for helping,*

*you know, you're seeking out new knowledge, then you're going to be great at what you do. [...] You've got a self-reflection component in it. [...] That opens up a dialogue, which is great" (Thorne / 0:20:40).*

*"Because people are filling out peer reviews for people, they're always conscious of these sorts of things..." (Thorne / 0:26:55).*

*"If it's only once a year, you should be giving that amount of consideration to things rather than just rushing through it, especially if you're hoping some changes are going to be made off the back of it" (Thorne / 0:27:39).*

*"When you've been working in a very micromanaged, task-driven approach, it's difficult for some people to come out of that approach, where they're being told what to do every day, to having to think what to do" (Thorne / 0:05:39).*

## **Communication / Feedback**

**Open communication and frequent feedback:** as cultural change is described as needing everyone's support, open communication and visibility are viewed as some of the most powerful tools to drive change. Frequent feedback loops about small steps and interim results are also aimed at making people feel more comfortable with change. Similarly, the organisation aspires to maximise customer feedback to ensure it is addressing actual needs. The company acknowledges that having honest conversations may be hard, but is vital to both resolve conflicts early and acts as a hygiene factor for autonomy (i.e. being able to challenge each other in a constructive way).

**Building practices around communication:** the company invests in workshops on soft skills and empathy, as well as building habits around collaboration and understanding each other through team retrospectives. Different ritualised meeting frameworks also foster ongoing communication (e.g. daily stand-ups, fortnightly reviews, monthly strategic reviews), as are various communication channels for different content (e.g. information sharing, knowledge base, collaboration, casual idea sharing).

*"That's a really awkward conversation. But an important one to have" (Thorne / 00:26:06).*

*"And so it might be at morning tea, we will stand up and present it and then we'll ask for some feedback" (Thorne / 0:48:00).*

*“Really thoughtful contributions... So I think hopefully it means that people know that it does have an impact. [...] And they know that this actually translates into actions or lack of taking actions. And so again, that's part of the trust that has been built up” (Thorne / 00:48:51).*

*“The first round of performance views, the common factor was communication conflicts. [...] So we did a whole load of workshops on sort of more softer skills and understanding different people, different personalities. We spend a lot more time in our retrospectives these days. Doing more team building. And understanding each other more than just understand what we worked on in the previous two weeks or whatever” (Thorne / 00:57:03).*

*“We were doing it almost by subterfuge rather than bringing it out into the open saying: Hey look, this are the goals we want to achieve as an organisation. But the organisational readiness was very powerfully in getting everybody's buy-in. To achieve that” (Edwards / 0:22:48).*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Basic disciplined structure as an enabling structure:** There is a strong belief that a base level of structure (i.e. an enabling structure) is necessary to allow building practices that ultimately enable autonomy, e.g. disciplined build pipeline, quick releases, analytics, getting real user feedback. Having those firm foundations in place then allows to be playful and fully focus on the benefits of autonomy.

**Leadership team:** the leadership team consists of the COO, CEO, CTO and two general managers.

**Company divided in two areas:** the entertainment centre and a smaller start-up hub with different product and market focus.

*“The interesting thing about this, a lot of people couldn't see the structure that I was bringing in was an enabling structure. [...] You need to have that base level of structure. [...] You had to have that tight structure. And so then we could let them all loose again” (Edwards / 0:34:30).*

*“I needed to get a few people to go: oh yeah, if we're going to succeed, this is the right way to do this. If we're going to build at speed, we need to do these good software practices” (Edwards / 0:36:29).*



## Self-concept of HR / People management

**Different than *traditional HR*:** traditional HR is described as focusing on compliance and ticking boxes. In contrast to that, the organisation strives to focus consistently on people. The goal is to care for people with a holistic perspective (which includes their mental health) and create an environment where they can flourish and collaborate. This approach is reported as having stemmed from the fact that there is no dedicated HR person, which essentially left the company with a blank canvas.

**General manager driving people aspects:** the general manager (also called *head of studio*) describes her role as looking after people and processes, which she summarises as operations. The definition of HR processes includes policies and procedures such as leave and work hours, salary structures, performance reviews or hiring.

*“You see, HR, it's always for the company, not for the person, not for the employee. Basically, HR, traditionally, is about covering the company's arse. Whereas our HR, because we don't have a person who is HR, it's very much more about the people. We're like: OK. Right. How can we do better for our people” (Thorne / 0:35:09)?*

*“Head of studio, type of thing. I guess my role is more about people and processes? [...] My goal is to build a company that people want to work for. That is known as someone who's good to employees, that really excels at what they do and takes care of their people, whether that's the customers, their employees, their clients or whatever. So, I don't know exactly what my role is. It's a bit of HR. It's a bit of operations. The thing that drives me is the people. Because we've got such talent and they're so amazing, the things they do just blow my mind on a daily basis. And so, I really believe that together we can build something great. And I just have to figure out how to get all that working together to then produce the awesomeness” (Thorne / 0:54:18).*

## Decision-making capacity

**Organisational change driven by initiatives:** the whole organisation has to agree on an initiative before any changes get implemented. Usually, the leadership team creates a first draft of any proposal and collaborates with the team in tight feedback loops until the proposal is ready for casting votes. Small iterations and involving the team in articulating the *why* as much as possible are reported as tools to make change less daunting.

**Delegated authority:** Decisions are made in the company using delegated authority, ensuring that everyone feels that they are valued and have a voice and is able to contribute based on meritocracy (i.e. on the basis of talent and achievement). Delegated authority is also viewed as a tool to raise entrepreneurial awareness and decision-making capability, e.g. by delegating resourcing and staffing to teams, they experience the pain-points first-hand (as opposed to top-down decisions).

*“So everyone is feeling that they are valued and have a voice in the company. The platform I created for that was delegated authority, which is how we make decisions in our company” (Thorne / 0:15:21).*

*“They try and work it out themselves. I think that's better, because you get more buy-in. It also gives them an understanding of the pain points as well. Resourcing is hideous, you know” (Edwards / 0:30:50).*

*“And that works really well because everyone then is aware, everybody can contribute or not. [...] So you've got to bring out all of the drivers. [...] We bring the problems to them, rather than us trying to solve it ourselves” (Edwards / 0:32:19).*

#### 4.3. Dot

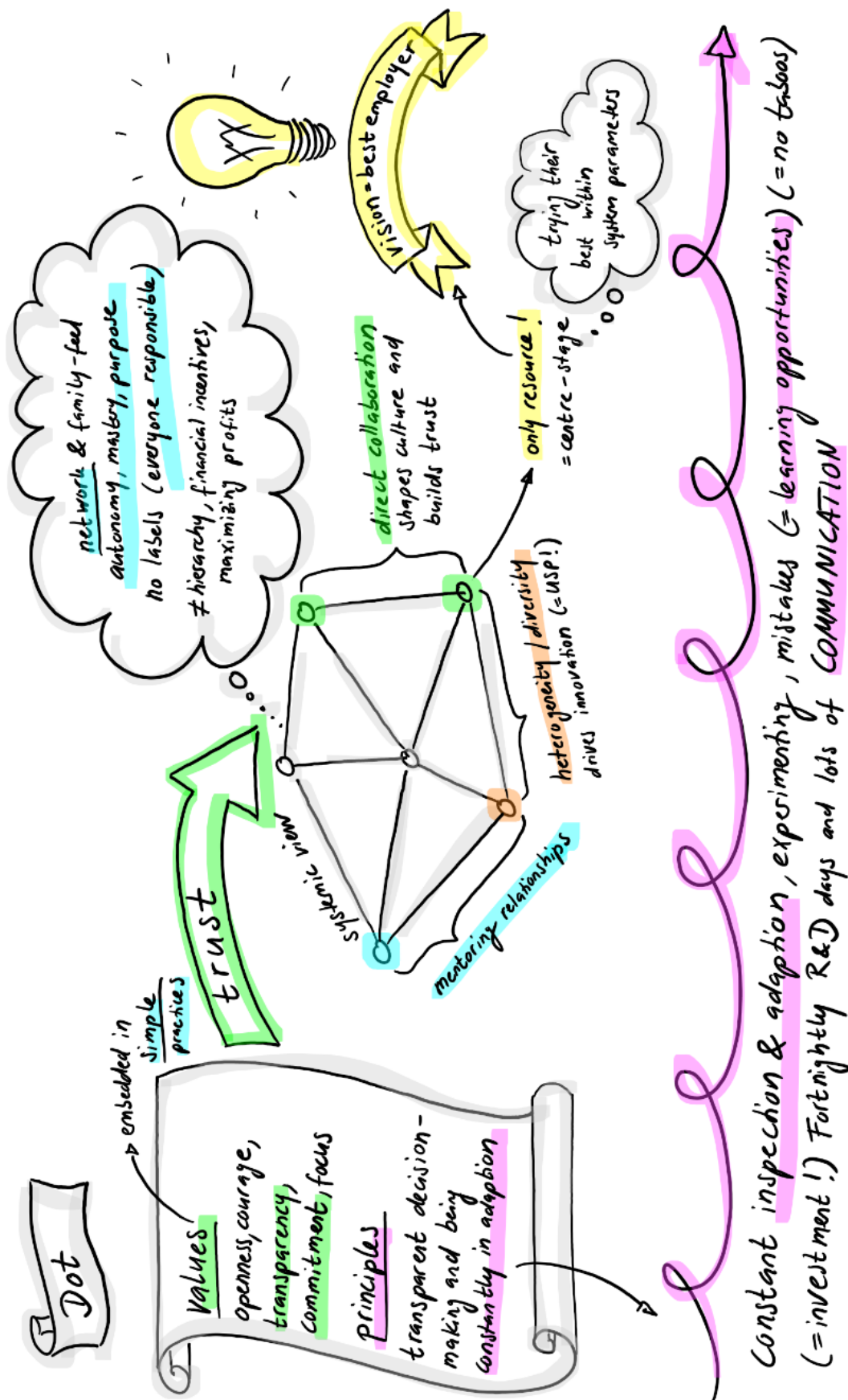


Figure 15 Concept map: Dot  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Collaboration in networks:** the organisation is compared to a network, where direct collaboration contributes to trusting relationships. Co-creation in diverse teams is viewed as a driver of innovation and creativity. Consulting projects are thus ideally completed in pairs.

**Investing in relationships:** as a distributed consultancy, investing in relationships is deemed the key to maintain a strong culture.

*“And what we realised: We really perform best by simply collaborating with each other” (Ellenberger / 0:07:22)<sup>1</sup>.*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Values and principles based on Agile:** based on the pillars of the Scrum framework (i.e. transparency, continuous learning, inspection and adaption), the five company values are openness, courage, transparency, commitment and focus. There is a strong belief that a company cannot solely rely on values disconnected from practices, but needs to embed principles in their actions. Closely linked to the Agile manifesto, these are described as transparent decision-making and being constantly in adaption.

**Creating a great place to work:** the organisation strives to be the best employer for like-minded consultants who share the same values and want to be an active member of a community (that is often compared to a family).

**People-centric approach:** People are considered to be centre-stage in more than one way. Consultants are the only resource the company has to offer, and hence need to be valued and invested in. Most of their consulting work is also done in the Agile space, where methods and processes are reported to play but a minor role in comparison to people aspects. The organisation further adopts a holistic view on consultants, which considers their partners and families a part of the network as well.

**Diversity a USP:** all consultants are considered equal, as the organisation's strength comes from the combination of individual strengths. Diversity of skills and perspectives is regarded as the key to creativity and innovation. Heterogeneity becomes a catalyst for new ideas in such an environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und was wir merken. Wir funktionieren eigentlich am allerbesten, wenn wir einfach miteinander zusammenarbeiten.*

**Trust as the foundation of collaboration:** Autonomy is a core-concept of the organisation, which is reflected in extremely flexible work arrangements and the ability to shape one's own roles (i.e. job creation). A strong shared purpose, belief in their way of working and a sense of trust allow the consultants to follow the motivators of autonomy, mastery and purpose. Individual financial incentives are frowned upon, as they are believed to simply create political systems. Making a profit is deemed merely a side-results of happy employees and happy clients (by proxy). Individual tracking of billable hours is equally seen as setting the wrong incentives and potentially blocking innovation.

*"Well, our values are largely based on what we know from Scrum. These three pillars: Transparency, inspection and adaption, continuous learning. You need [...] to share certain core values: Candour, courage, respect, commitment [...] and focus. [...] That's nothing new. [...] So, values are something that all individuals have for themselves. And we tend to differ values from principles, which we are convinced an organisation needs as well. And our principles are connected to the Agile manifesto. For example, it is important to us that we make transparent decisions. That's more important than making decisions that last a long time" (Ellenberger / 0:00:08)<sup>2</sup>.*

*"And for us, this means that we value people and we embed our values directly in our practices, which then show what kind of values we have" (Ellenberger / 0:01:57)<sup>3</sup>.*

*"We want to work with the baseline of trust. Contracts are always a signal of mistrust. Sure, there are some legal topics that demand contracts. But for everything else, we just want to live up to: we trust" (Ellenberger / 0:27:34)<sup>4</sup>.*

*"When you're reading a book at home, then this is considered work, because it's valuable. There are a lot of companies who simply don't treat their employees right. And that blocks innovation. No one is going to say: awesome,*

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<sup>2</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Also, unsere Werte sind eigentlich sehr stark angelehnt an das, was man eigentlich auch von Scrum kennt. Also, diese drei Säulen: Transparenz, Inspektion / Adaption, kontinuierliches Lernen. [...] Es braucht gewisse Grundwerte, die wir miteinander teilen müssen. Als Menschen. Und diese Grundwerte sind: Offenheit, Mut, Respekt, Commitment [...] und Fokus. [...] Das ist nicht irgendetwas Neues. [...] Also, die Werte, das ist ja dieses Individuelle, das jeder für sich hat. Und wir haben das ein wenig unterschieden und gesagt, ein Unternehmen braucht Prinzipien. Und Prinzipien gehen dann ein wenig mehr in die Richtung des agilen Manifests. Also, wir finden es zum Beispiel wichtiger, dass unsere Entscheide, die wir fällen, transparent sind. Das ist wichtiger, als dass sie irgendwie für eine mega lange Zeit halten.*

<sup>3</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und das bedeutet für uns, ja, wir wertschätzen die Menschen und wir haben aber ganz viel eigentlich in unseren Practices festgelegt, woran wir dann sehen, was wir für Werte haben.*

<sup>4</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und wir wollen auf der Basis von Vertrauen arbeiten. Verträge sind eigentlich immer ein Signal von Misstrauen. Klar gibt es rechtliche Themen, bei denen man Verträge machen muss. Aber alles andere, da wollen wir einfach leben: Wir haben Vertrauen.*

*I have an idea, I'm going to follow up on that! If they have to think about: well, if I do it, will it get appreciated" (Ellenberger / 0:34:54)<sup>5</sup>?*

*"And money is not the goal either. [...] Money is the result of good work. You strive for: happy employee, equals happy customer, equals lots of money. This is the order" (Ellenberger / 0:44:08)<sup>6</sup>.*

*"It is always about people. How we work together. I always say, everything else falls into place" (Gerber / 0:04:59)<sup>7</sup>.*

*"We work a lot. And sometimes this means sacrifices at home. Which is why we want to show appreciation: hey, you are a part of it, too. You are also: Connecting the dots" (Gerber / 0:06:02)<sup>8</sup>.*

*"And we're really looking for this diversity. [...] And sometimes this can cause contradictions as well. And we try to sell that as our USP. At the end of the day, the best you can offer is a combination of both: Methodology and people. Having that said, one is more important than the other" (Gerber / 0:09:37)<sup>9</sup>.*

*"A pack of like-minded people. Not completely arbitrarily. Maybe comparable to a family. Similar values. We don't have the same genes, but somehow, we have the same mindset" (Gerber / 0:23:30)<sup>10</sup>.*

## Image of the human person

**People as individuals who are doing their best:** People are seen as individuals who all have their own story and are, as a baseline, doing the best they can. If they are not performing their best, then that might be attributable to the system they are in.

<sup>5</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Das heisst, wenn du zuhause ein Buch liest, dann geht es um das Arbeiten, das ist wertvoll. Und auch da gibt es ganz viele Firmen, die ihre Mitarbeiter einfach nicht richtig behandeln. Und so blockierst du Innovation. Da wird doch nie jemand selbständig am Wochenende sagen: Voll geil, ich habe eine Idee, ich verfolge die. Wenn er sich überlegen muss: Ja, wenn ich das mache, wird das dann wertgeschätzt?*

<sup>6</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und Geld ist auch nicht das Ziel. [...] Geld ist eine Folge von guter Arbeit. Also, du arbeitest darauf hin: Happy employee, gleich happy customer, gleich viel Geld. Das ist die Reihenfolge.*

<sup>7</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Es geht alles um den Menschen. Wie arbeiten wir zusammen. Alles andere kommt von alleine, sage ich immer.*

<sup>8</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Wir arbeiten viel. Und dann manchmal gibt es auch einen Verzicht Zuhause, und damit wir da auch eine Wertschätzung rüberbringen: Hey, ihr seid auch ein Teil davon. Ihr seid auch: Connecting the Dots.*

<sup>9</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und wir suchen ja eben diese Diversität. [...] Und das kann sich manchmal halt auch beissen. Wir probieren das als unsere USP zu verkaufen. Und es ist am Ende des Tages, wenn es ineinander fliesst, auch das Beste, was man anbieten kann: Methodik und Mensch. Wobei das eine ist wichtiger als das Andere zwar.*

<sup>10</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Einen Klumpen von Gleichgesinnten. Nicht einfach willkürlich zusammengesucht. Ich glaube, auch eine Familie ist irgendwo eine ähnliche Ausrichtung. Ähnliche Werte. Gleiche Gene haben wir nicht, aber irgendwie ein gleiches Mindset.*

*“The individual dimension: People have a story. Everyone has their own story. And this story shapes us” (Ellenberger / 0:08:13)<sup>11</sup>.*

*“We really believe that, following this positive conception of the human being, that everyone is trying to do their best. And if they are not performing their best: maybe in that case it’s just the system preventing it, and not the person” (Ellenberger / 0:43:45)<sup>12</sup>.*

### Definition of leadership

**Leadership is omnipresent:** Leadership is explained as something inherent to any system. For example, if there are no formal leaders, then organisational members automatically share a part of that leadership – at least in the sense of being responsible for yourself as well as the system. The structure of the consultancy is described as suitable for consultants who seek an environment beyond traditional hierarchical managing structure and prefer to be in mentoring relationships instead.

**Leadership is self-reflective:** following the consultancy’s definition, being less reactive and constantly reflecting on your own contribution to team dynamics is part of owning your leadership role. It is also reported that consultants who may have less experience working in highly transparent and autonomous environments may struggle at first, regressing to hierarchical patterns when under tension.

*“And then you have to deal with all those tensions regarding leadership. You always have some sort of leadership. You can’t say there is no leadership. This is complete nonsense, when people say: oh yes, we operate without leaders. Well, if you don’t have leaders, then everyone is a leader. Then everyone is responsible for leadership. Responsible for leading themselves, as well as the system to a certain extent” (Ellenberger / 0:10:41)<sup>13</sup>.*

*“Personally, being a leader isn’t important to me. [...] In the sense of line management. I couldn’t care less what’s written on my business card. The most important thing is that we understand each other within the first few minutes. If I carry the title principle consultant or whatnot, I couldn’t care less.*

<sup>11</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Die individuelle Dimension ist: Menschen haben eine Geschichte. Jeder hat seine Geschichte. Und diese Geschichte prägt.*

<sup>12</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir glauben wirklich daran, dass du, wenn du von einem guten Menschenbild ausgehst, dass jeder das Beste zu machen probiert. Auch wenn er nicht das Beste liefert. Dann ist es vielfach das System, und nicht er.*

<sup>13</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und du musst auch mit all diesen Spannungen umgehen in Bezug auf Führung. Führung hast du auf eine Art immer. Du kannst nicht sagen, es gibt keine Führung. Und das ist völliger Habakkuk, wenn die Leute sagen: Ja, wir sind jetzt im Fall ohne Führung. Ja, wenn du keine Führung hast, dann ist jeder Führung. Dann ist jeder Einzelne für die Führung verantwortlich. Und zwar für sich selber, aber auch ein Stück weit für das System.*



*I much more prefer mentoring relationships, where you can really leave that organisation chart behind and communicate at eye level” (Gerber / 0:15:54)<sup>14</sup>.*

## Learning organisation

**Organisation as a dynamic system:** Organisations and teams are described as complex and dynamic systems, shaped by the people and the system parameters. Experimenting, adapting and adjusting is the consultancy’s mode of constantly re-calibrating this system and aligning it with its values, well aware that they will never be able to reach perfection.

**Mistakes as learning opportunities:** Learning is described as a result of making mistakes, as opposed to the sheer accumulation of knowledge. Constant learning is thus described as a driver of truly being agile, which in turn is only possible in an environment of trust, transparency and communication where no topics are off-limits.

**Investment in collective learning:** the whole consultancy comes together for fortnightly R&D days (e.g. on team or company development).

*“Well, we are in constant adaption” (Ellenberger / 0:01:15)<sup>15</sup>.*

*“We have made lots of mistakes. But that’s totally OK. You only learn by making mistakes. Everything is else is purely accumulation of knowledge” (Ellenberger / 0:09:39)<sup>16</sup>.*

*“You have to change the parameters of the system to allow everyone to do their best. Of course there are limitations, you can’t make it perfect for everyone” (Ellenberger / 0:43:10)<sup>17</sup>.*

*“We all make mistakes, because we are human. And because we say at the same time: we are agile. Transparency, inspection and adaption, continuous learning. We try to learn. We don’t do everything perfectly. Far from it” (Ellenberger / 0:44:34)<sup>18</sup>.*

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<sup>14</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Die Führung ist mir persönlich nicht wichtig. [...] Linie. Das ist mir völlig Wurst, was auf meiner Visitenkarte steht. Wichtig ist, dass wir uns in den ersten paar Minuten verstehen. Und ob da jetzt Principal draufsteht oder schiess-mich-tot, das ist mir völlig Hans was Heiri. Und, ich habe viel lieber so eine Götti-Beziehung, weisst du, bei der man auch wirklich auch aus dem Organigramm heraustreten und auf Augenhöhe miteinander kommunizieren kann.*

<sup>15</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, wir sind stetig in der Adaption und am Anpassen.*

<sup>16</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, wir haben mega viele Fehler gemacht. Und das ist völlig OK. Du lernst nur, wenn du Fehler machst. Alles andere ist Aneignung von Wissen.*

<sup>17</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Du musst die Systemparameter so ändern, dass jeder das Beste machen kannst. Natürlich gibt es hier Grenzen, und du kannst nicht alles genau für jeden perfekt machen.*

<sup>18</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir machen auch Fehler, weil wir Menschen sind. Weil wir gleichzeitig auch sagen: Wir sind agil. Transparenz, Inspektion und Adaption, konstantes Lernen. Wir versuchen halt auch dort zu lernen. Wir machen halt nicht alles perfekt. Bei Weitem nicht.*



## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Own work experience:** the drive to create a great place to work stems from own past work experience that did not live up to this claim.

*“And I think this is our motivation. We just want to be an employer that others look up to and think: yes, it is possible. That was the start of it all” (Ellenberger / 0:44:58)<sup>19</sup>.*

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Organisational forms:** both Sociocracy and Holacracy are mentioned several times.

**Innovation theory:** a theory of the organisational psychologist Peter Kruse's is used to describe innovation and creativity as depending on having diverse teams.

**Team dynamics:** Bruce Tuckman's theory of the different stages of group development is quoted in regard to team dynamics.

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

**Mentor fulfils initial administration:** initial administrative tasks such as work contracts or insurance registrations are fulfilled by a new consultant's allocated onboarding mentor. This is another reason why documents and processes are kept as simple and automated as possible.

### Salary / Finances

**Full financial transparency and same salary:** full transparency over all salary and financial processes, including profit distribution. All consultants have the same salary and the same pension plan. Financial incentives do not fit with the culture of the consultancy, and paying a decent base salary is simply seen as a hygiene factor to take the topic off the table.

<sup>19</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und ich glaube, das ist die Motivation. Wir wollen einfach ein Arbeitgeber sein, zu dem die Leute hinschauen und denken: Ja, es ist möglich. Denn das war wie der Start des Ganzen.*

*“We have full transparency over all salaries and financial processes. Every one of us sees everything” (Ellenberger / 0:02:10)<sup>20</sup>.*

## Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Opportunity-driven hiring:** Hiring predominantly takes place through the consultants’ network, which ensures they know the candidate’s story and ideally have experiences of collaborating with the candidate as well. The hiring decision itself is a collaborative decision.

**Criteria:** the hiring process is aimed at creating a great team with a common vision and similar values, which is compared to a family. The goal however is not homogeneity, but a circle of like-minded people that bring their different strengths to the table. To thrive in this highly autonomous setting, consultants should be self-confident and good communicators, which especially includes the ability to listen.

**Employer branding:** the consultancy strives to be a preferred employer and cutting-edge in its way of working. Its public image and reputation are therefore enormously important in the recruitment process.

*“Why do we recruit the way we recruit? Because growth isn’t the goal” (Ellenberger / 0:44:01)<sup>21</sup>.*

## On- / Offboarding

**Onboarding mentors:** every new consultant is paired with another consultant who acts as a mentor from the start. These mentors guide through the onboarding process and frequently check in with the new consultant. An onboarding retrospective after the three months includes highlights, lowlights, and potential areas to improve.

## Development / Performance

**No performance tracking:** there is no differentiating between billable and non-billable hours: everything is considered work and an investment in the company.

**People-centric development:** the consultancy holds the opinion that methods and processes only account for 30% of success in agile transformations,

<sup>20</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben volle Transparenz über alle Lohn- und Finanzprozesse. Also, jeder von uns sieht alles.*

<sup>21</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wieso rekrutieren wir so, wie wir rekrutieren? Weil Wachstum nicht das Ziel ist.*

whereas the remaining 70% is all about people and their ability to change. By implication, consultants themselves emphasise their own development, e.g. by seeing psychologists to reflect on their own communication or demeanour.

**Collective learning:** the whole team spends a day a fortnight on either team building or directly business-related activities (e.g. collaboration on projects or knowledge-sharing). If a suitable facilitator is available (and there is no role-conflict by the facilitator being part of the system), some trainings are also held internally for the whole consultancy (e.g. SAFe or LEGO Serious Play).

**Individual learning:** as a basic principle, consultants are responsible for driving and organising their own personal and professional development. While the mentor-mentee relationship promotes self-reflection and learning on-the-job, consultants are also encouraged to take part in external trainings. Consultants get rewarded for participating in training (e.g. by free time, paid trainings, and gift vouchers upon completion).

*“In Agile, these methods and processes maybe account for 30% of the impact. You can train people and you can explain stuff to them. But it’s the human that has to change. And that’s the remaining 70%. Roughly. We say, if you truly want to be agile, then you really invest in yourself as a person. A lot! And this is the reason why some of us see psychologists, simply as coaches, to reflect on their communication and demeanour. To work on themselves. To understand: what’s my influence” (Ellenberger / 0:13:00)<sup>22</sup>?*

*“When you complete a training, then we reward you. And there are a lot of people who say: are you nuts? [...] And we’re like: why not? We only have a single resource, and it’s our employees. If we sell all our laptops, we couldn’t even finance a single month” (Ellenberger / 0:35:57)<sup>23</sup>.*

## Communication / Feedback

**Open communication:** as consultants come from a different background and bring their own experiences and socialisation to the table, everything should be open for discussion. Open and direct communication is therefore the preferred tool for resolving tension and has to be factual and non-reactive. In

<sup>22</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *In der Agilität, diese Methoden und Prozesse, mit denen machst du vielleicht 30% Impact. Du kannst die Leute alle schulen, du kannst denen erklären, wie es geht. Aber der Mensch ist der, der sich ändern muss. Und das ist 70%. Das ist so ein Zahlenspiel. Aber wir sagen, wenn du wirklich agil vorgehen willst, dann musst du als Mensch echt etwas machen. Und zwar richtig viel. Und das führt dazu, dass jetzt einige von uns zu Psychologen gehen, einfach als Coaches, um ihre Kommunikation zu reflektieren, ihr Auftreten zu reflektieren, und so selber an sich zu arbeiten. Um auch verstehen zu können: Welchen Einfluss nehme ich auf das Ganze.*

<sup>23</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und wenn Du eine Weiterbildung machst, dann belohnen wir dich. Und da gibt es allerhand Leute, die sagen: Ja, seid ihr nicht ganz dicht? [...] Und wir so: Wieso nicht? Wir haben nur eine einzige Ressource, und das ist der Mitarbeiter. Wenn wir alle Laptops verkaufen, können wir nicht mal einen Monat finanzieren.*

that context, psychological safety becomes an increasingly important topic that is being raised in team events.

**Direct feedback:** instead of formal reviews or performance tracking, the consultancy relies on direct and informal feedback, e.g. identifying key learnings immediately after a lost sales pitch.

*“And if we lose a pitch or something, then it’s beneficial to just come together really quick and gather: what went well, what’s a highlight, what’s a lowlight. What’s our takeaway? Not over-engineering it. [...] It’s not a failure, but we should still learn from it” (Gerber / 0:25:38)<sup>24</sup>.*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Fluid and simple network structure:** the consultancy has experimented with various organisational forms, which are still part of an ongoing discussion. The ideal company structure is reported to depend on the people and their current needs (e.g. for control, clarity or status), which is therefore something dynamic. The most important aha-moment for the consultancy was the realisation that trust is the most crucial element for success, and that it is achieved mainly through collaboration and communication. Any company structure therefore must foster these practices. Avoiding overly complex processes is also viewed as beneficial, as these would increase administrative and coordinative tasks without adding any value. At the moment, the company resembles a network structure without formal labels and shared leadership.

*“And our practices include the maxim of: we avoid complexity. [...] It would simply imply more administrative work. And apart from administrating it you also have to communicate it. [...] And coordinate it. [...] It simply doesn’t make sense from an entrepreneurial point of view, it’s pointless. [...] no client is paying for that” (Ellenberger / 0:05:20)<sup>25</sup>.*

*“The connections, the networking character. Connecting the dots. And: everything is a dot. Everyone is a part of it. This is important to us, that we*

<sup>24</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wenn mal etwas verloren geht, dann liegt mir schon daran, dass wir wenigstens kurz zusammensitzen und sagen: Das ist gut gelaufen, das ist ein Highlight, das ist ein Lowlight. Was können wir mitnehmen? Nicht over-engineeren. [...] Es ist ja kein Fehler, aber wir sollten doch daraus lernen.*

<sup>25</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Was wir in diesen Practices auch drin haben, das ist: Wir wollen möglichst keine Komplexität. [...] Das gibt mir ja nur mehr Aufwand, das zu administrieren. Und dann muss ich nebst dem, dass ich es administrieren muss, dann muss ich noch einen Weg finden, das zu kommunizieren. [...] Und koordinieren. [...] Und wir sind der Meinung, dass das unternehmerisch einfach keinen Sinn macht, das ist nicht zielgerichtet. [...] das zahlt dir eigentlich kein Kunde.*

*combine our strengths. And of course our purpose: we have no CEO, we are dots” (Gerber / 0:06:35)<sup>26</sup>.*

*“I don’t want to say it is wrong. But when everyone is trying their best, in the interest of the company, of the team, then I’d almost say: we don’t need management anymore. I’m very provocative in that regard. What’s important is that there are feedback cycles. But who says they can’t be around peers” (Gerber / 0:16:50)<sup>27</sup>?*

*“All this stuff about boxes and circles, or whatever else it is... What is the most important thing [...]? [...] It is people. And trust” (Gerber / 0:21:55)<sup>28</sup>.*

*“I can craft my own job” (Gerber / 0:34:45)<sup>29</sup>.*

### Self-concept of HR / People management

*No data*

### Decision-making capacity

**Shared responsibility:** Consultants are described as being responsible for themselves as well as the system they are working in (e.g. through shared decision-making). As a result, consultants feel like they have an actual impact on the organisation as a whole (e.g. the brand itself or the service portfolio through job crafting opportunities).

*“There’s politics in our organisation as well [...] it’s not just gone completely. [...] But you have more impact. And that’s the biggest difference, in a positive way” (Gerber / 0:31:12)<sup>30</sup>.*

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<sup>26</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Einfach dieses Verbindende, der Networking-Charakter. Connecting the Dots. Dann: Everything is a Dot. Jeder ist ein Teil davon. Das ist wichtig, dass man Stärken zusammenbringt. Und dann der Purpose halt: We have no CEO, we are Dots.*

<sup>27</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Ich finde das andere jetzt nicht falsch. Aber wenn alle wirklich mit den besten Absichten arbeiten, das Beste für die Corporate möchten, für die Abteilung, für das Team, für wen auch immer, dann würde ich fast schon sagen: Man kann auf klassische Führung verzichten. Da bin ich sehr provokativ. Mir ist das wichtig, dass es eine Feedback-Schleife gibt. Aber wer sagt, dass das nicht von den Peers sein kann?*

<sup>28</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Solche Boxen-Geschichten, solche Circle-Geschichten, was es dann am Schluss auch ist... Was ist der wichtigste Wert dort [...]? [...] Der Mensch. Und das Vertrauen ineinander.*

<sup>29</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Ich kann meinen eigenen Beruf gestalten.*

<sup>30</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Es gibt auch bei uns Politik, weißt du, [...] es ist nicht von hundert auf null. [...] Mehr Impact. Das ist der grosse Unterschied, im Positiven.*

#### 4.4. Ergon

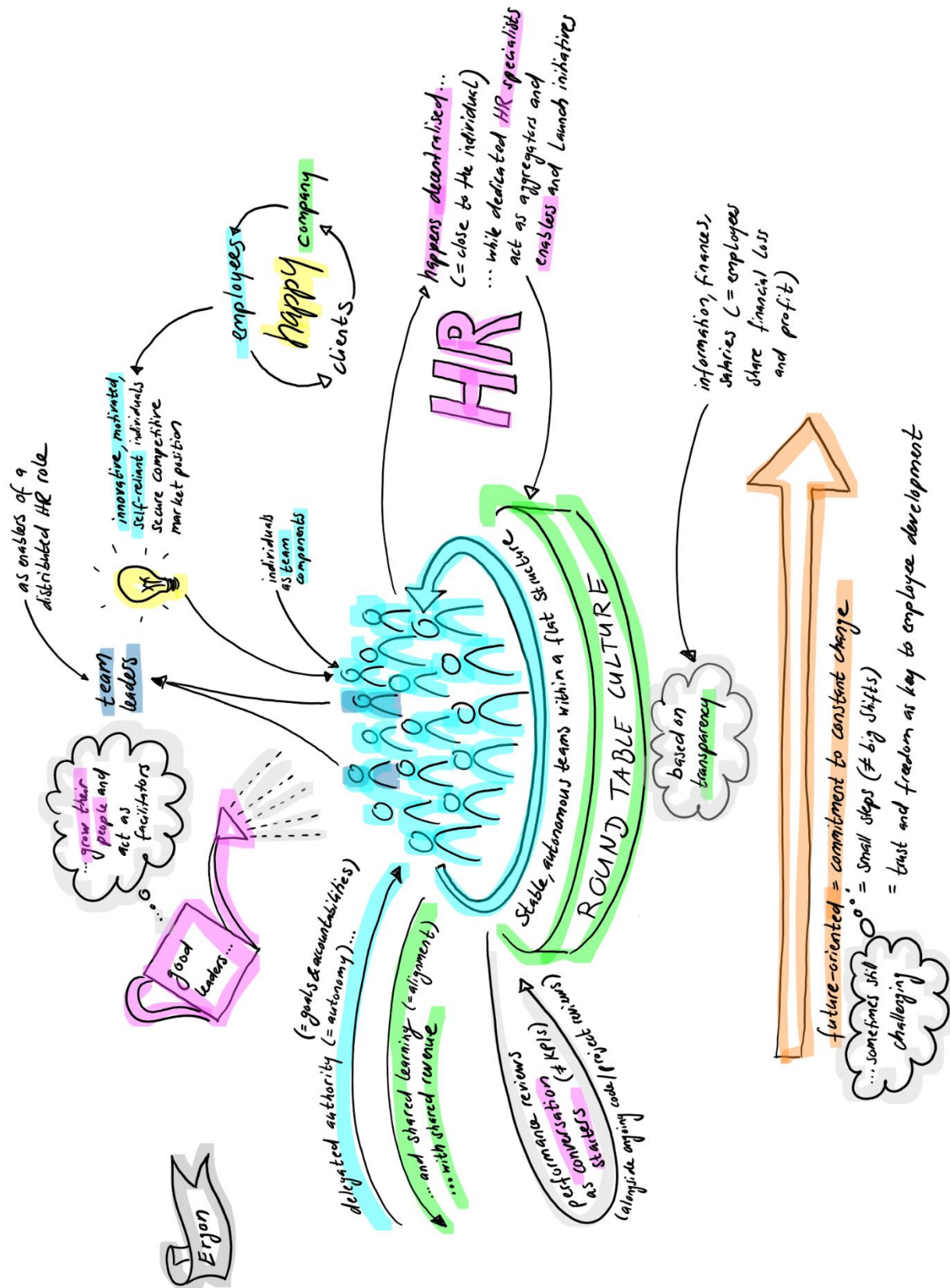


Figure 16 Concept map: Ergon  
Own figure

**Stable project teams:** Project teams with a largely stable composition are at the core of how work gets done. The employee's everyday work experience is shaped by these highly collaborative and autonomous teams. While people are valued as individuals, they are always simultaneously seen as a team component. Building close relationships within teams is therefore considered vital. Self-selection is another crucial aspect, as it is believed that these kinds of teams will usually work better together.

**Delegated authority and shared learning:** while teams operate largely autonomous and make their own decisions, there is an emphasis on shared learning and sharing insights across the whole organisation. This includes the team leaders who come together for fortnightly sessions of collegial consultation, where HR is also present.

*"And a team has a stable core. [...] This is where we're different from a lot of other companies that staff their projects from a pool of experts. We prefer a more team-oriented perspective" (Keller / 0:16:54)<sup>31</sup>.*

*"A strong delegation of responsibility. And they are really responsible for their own projects. They have decided to do it, so they have to follow through. With the goal of sharing insights with the rest of the organisation as well" (Keller / 0:18:39)<sup>32</sup>.*

*"Employees' everyday work experience mainly happens within the teams" (Keller / 0:29:56)<sup>33</sup>.*

*"When it comes to values, I think people are centre-stage. But always as a part of their team as well" (Erdtner / 0:02:02)<sup>34</sup>.*

*"When you work with the same person for several years then I'd expect you to know more about that person than simply a few work-related facts. [...] Because it influences the collaboration. While the business-side might be at the forefront, it has to be complemented with a deeper, friendship-like*

<sup>31</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und ein Team hat auch einen stabilen Kern. [...] Da unterscheiden wir uns von vielen anderen Firmen, die Pools von Experten haben und dann Projekte staffen da draus. Bei uns ist das viel eine teamorientiertere Sicht.*

<sup>32</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Starke Delegation von Verantwortung. Und diese sind dann aber auch wirklich für ihre Projekte verantwortlich. Sie haben ja entschieden, wie sie es machen wollen, dann müssen sie es auch selber ausbaden. Und mit dem Ziel, dass man das Knowhow auch wieder zurückspielt in die Gesamtfirma [...].*

<sup>33</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Die Realität der einzelnen Mitarbeiter findet sehr stark in diesen Teams statt.*

<sup>34</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Von den Werten selber her, denke ich, steht nach wie vor die Person im Vordergrund. Aber immer auch die Person in einer Teamkonstellation.*



*relationship. [...] And as with any relationship, you have to invest in it as well” (Erdtner / 0:07:17)<sup>35</sup>.*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Happy employees, happy clients, happy company:** there is a strong belief that a company that creates an environment where employees can feel content and comfortable leads to higher employee engagement and retention, which then allows to deliver better results for clients.

**Participation:** the analogy of the “round table” is used to describe how the company operates and refers to its roots in an equal partnership between early owners. This principle is still in place today, e.g. by maximising employee participation in setting the strategy or re-defining company values, in order to ensure a shared understanding and commitment. Participation thus serves as a core value and includes employees sharing both risk and success.

**Continuous improvement:** taking risks, making forward-thinking decisions and the ability to address conflicts are parts of the core value continuous improvement. However, radical changes are not in line with the company culture. Instead, it relies on small steps, iterations and experiments.

**Transparency:** as another core value, transparency includes sharing, open and respectful communication as well as open access to relevant information, allowing employees to make informed decisions. Transparency is thus regarded an enabler of decentralisation and empowerment.

**Diversity:** Individuals are centre-stage, yet at the same time are always viewed within a team constellation. Diverse teams ensure a variety of perspectives, which is believed to create high-performing teams.

**Empowerment and trust:** the organisation is built around the principle of empowered, self-reliant and committed individuals, that thrive in an environment that grants them a high-degree of autonomy and has little control-mechanisms. This principle is visible in practices e.g. by the independent delivery of work in project teams, flexible work arrangements or training budgets.

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wenn ich mehrere Jahre mit einer Person zusammenarbeite, würde ich eigentlich verlangen, dass man auch mehr darüber weiss, als jetzt nur die Person bei der Arbeit. [...] Das fließt ein in die Arbeit. Und auch in die Zusammenarbeit. Und, die Komponenten von, wirklich Business, ja, ist im Fokus und im Vordergrund, und muss aber ergänzt werden durch ein freundschaftliches, soziales Verhältnis. [...] Und das heisst, ähnlich wie in einer Partnerschaft, heisst das halt: Permanent dranbleiben.*



*“And that was the starting point for our round-table culture. Because at that point in time, there were these eight equal partners who discussed everything while sitting around a table. When we came onboard later, as the company was growing, we kind of mentally joined this table. [...] how we operate, how we collaborate, that really was founded back then” (Keller / 0:00:35)<sup>36</sup>.*

*“We have three values. The first one is ‘always better’ and encapsulates continuous improvement. [...] The most important one, for sure, is ‘transparency’. [...] And the third value is ‘participating’. We share both risk and success” (Keller / 0:02:20)<sup>37</sup>.*

*“Another important value is the high degree of autonomy and self-reliance. It is important to us that employees make their own decisions in their area of expertise and are holistically involved. Acting self-reliant” (Zirn / 0:06:46)<sup>38</sup>.*

*“You can foster that. Respectively, I won’t say fostering, but you need a certain fundamental attitude. And that attitude is called trust” (Zirn / 0:25:16)<sup>39</sup>.*

*“A lot is repaid in an indirect way. The less you focus on rules, or on processes. And the company has never really been too prescriptive, and granted freedom. It’s this combination of autonomy and at the same time providing a platform for people to collaborate [...] The better I can support my people, the better they will perform” (Erdtner / 0:38:24)<sup>40</sup>.*

## Image of the human person

**Want for collaboration:** the high-end clients and complex projects demand creative thinking, innovation, collaboration and a high degree of engagement from employees. The workplace thus needs to be built around these principles, to allow employees do great work for their clients. The organisation is convinced that people in general are intrinsically motivated, want to do good work and collaborate. It considers its employees to be

<sup>36</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und das war so der Startschuss dieser Kultur des runden Tisches. Also, ab diesem Zeitpunkt waren diese acht gleichwertigen Partner und besprachen alles am runden Tisch. Und als wir später dazukamen, als die Firma wuchs, saßen wir quasi geistig an diesem runden Tisch. [...] wie wir funktionieren, wie wir miteinander umgehen, das entstand eigentlich dadurch.*

<sup>37</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, wir haben drei Werte. Der erste ist "immer besser", wo wir uns laufend weiterverbessern wollen. [...] Der Wichtigste, sicher, immer schon, ist Transparenz. [...] Und der dritte Wert ist "beteiligt". Wir sind beteiligt an Risiko und Erfolg.*

<sup>38</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und dann auch noch ein weiterer Wert, sind diese hohe Selbstständigkeit und Eigenverantwortung. Also, wir legen extrem hohen Wert darauf, dass die Mitarbeiter in ihrem Bereich auch Entscheidungen treffen, dass sie da ganzheitlich involviert sind. Und, ja, eigenverantwortlich handeln.*

<sup>39</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Das kann man fördern, beziehungsweise, ich sage jetzt nicht fördern, sondern da braucht es eine Grundhaltung dazu. Und die nennt sich Vertrauen.*

<sup>40</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und vieles kommt über den indirekten Weg wieder zurück. Je weniger man Dinge mit Regeln behaftet, oder Prozessen. Und, da hat die Firma nie so wirklich Wert darauf gelegt, das bis ins Detail zu definieren, sondern die Freiheit haben wir. Und das ist eine Kombination aus Freiheit und auch eine gute Plattform schaffen, dass die Leute miteinander ihren Alltag bestreiten. [...] Also, je besser ich da die Leute betreuen und unterstützen kann, desto besser performen sie.*

autonomous, resourceful individuals that think holistically and work best in a highly autonomous environment.

### Definition of leadership

**Leaders as enablers and facilitators:** the company's leadership principles include being a role model for a culture around communication and trust, facilitating decision-making, solving conflicts and being enablers of delegated authority. Leaders need to be approachable and invest time in people aspects. If leaders are not willing or able to set aside time for these time-consuming tasks, they are considered to be better off as a project leader or account manager. Learning about leadership and people management is also considered vital, as having great subject matter expertise does not necessarily make one a great leader.

**Leaders grow their people:** as opposed to managers, leaders are considered to be constantly engaged in developing and growing both their people as well as themselves – and are not driven by status or monetary incentives. When employees struggle or make mistakes, they do not judge too quickly and first of all reflect on their own role in the matter. Asking questions and being present are regarded as the cornerstones of good leadership.

*“Having an open-door policy is also important to me. [...] It can be very intense. People management is intense, because you always have to be there for your people, you have to make the time. You have to adjust to different people. [...] But you have to make the time, because it signals it's important. And if one's always too busy and won't make time, then that person mustn't lead a team” (Erdtner / 0:42:35)<sup>41</sup>.*

*“This is why I differentiate between a manager and a leader. [...] Because for me, it also means: are you capable of developing and growing your team, your environment, and yourself” (Erdtner / 0:53:44)<sup>42</sup>.*

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<sup>41</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ja, also es ist vielleicht auch etwas, das für mich noch wichtig ist, dass die Türe zu einem Büro immer offen ist. [...] Also, es ist doch sehr intensiv. People Management ist sehr intensiv, weil man für die Leute da sein muss, weil man sich die Zeit nehmen muss. Und sich halt immer wieder auf neue Personen einstellen. [...] Aber, die Zeit muss man sich nehmen, weil man damit auch signalisiert, dass es wichtig ist. Und wenn jemand immer sehr hektisch unterwegs ist und sehr viel zu tun hat und sich für das keine Zeit nimmt, dann darf er kein Team leiten.*

<sup>42</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Deswegen gibt es für mich auch einen grossen Unterschied zwischen einem Manager und einem Leader. [...] Weil das heisst auch: Bist du in der Lage, die Leute, die in deinem Team, in deinem Umfeld sind, selber weiterzuentwickeln.*

## Learning organisation

**Being future-oriented:** while the core structure of the company has existed for over 20 years (i.e. flat hierarchy and autonomous teams), the company's recently revised set of values strengthens the importance of being future-oriented. This includes the commitment to anticipate change, being curious and experimenting in order to constantly evolve. The organisation also acknowledges that growth takes place outside one's comfort zone, which requires the courage to take risks and make mistakes. Change is believed to be most sustainable when it takes place in small continuous steps.

**Trust as the key to employee development:** Trust is regarded to be the key to foster engagement, autonomy and self-responsibility: the company needs to trust employees and by implication allow them to make their own mistakes.

**Individual and collective learning:** Learning and training is aimed at continuous improvement and is shaped by both individual and collective learning. For example, while teams decide on the technology they are using, a company-wide sounding board keeps track of existing and new tools and connects learnings. Project KPIs are not used to measure teams against each other, but to ensure continuous learning and development within teams.

*"And we want to anticipate change. We want to be curious, to experiment with technologies and methodologies. We want to advance. [...] And we are willing to leave our comfort zone. We try to be courageous, to learn from risks" (Keller / 0:02:20)<sup>43</sup>.*

*"Being future-oriented is extremely important. We don't want to hit a wall after 35 years because we rely on what worked before" (Keller / 0:12:07)<sup>44</sup>.*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Market position:** the high-price market segment that the company operates in calls for close interaction with clients to customise solutions. As a result, the company reports to rely on driven, autonomous and innovative employees, for which they have to create a suitable environment.

<sup>43</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und wir wollen Veränderungen antizipieren. Wir wollen wissbegierig sein, experimentieren mit Technologien und Methoden. Und wir wollen uns weiterentwickeln. [...] Und wir sind bereit, unsere Komfortzone zu verlassen. Wir probieren Mut zu haben, aus Risiken zu lernen.*

<sup>44</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Eben das Zukunftsorientierte, das sehr wichtig ist, damit wir nicht jetzt nach 35 Jahren in eine Mauer rennen weil wir finden, das war ja schon immer gut.*

*“People are engaged, way above average. We are a Swiss engineering company without a branch in a low-wage country, which is why we work in a premium segment for sure. And that means we do projects that are challenging and that demand close collaboration with the customer. [...] And it’s also this correlation of: this is how everyone of us wants to be treated. How everyone of us wants to work. At the same time, digitalisation acts as an accelerator. It’s getting more and more complex. To solve the problems and challenges we are faced with in and around work, we need close collaboration in a network structure. This has to go hand in hand. And if you micromanage people, especially in a knowledge organisation... Well, we need people who think beyond boxes” (Keller / 0:32:41)<sup>45</sup>.*

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Organisational form:** Holacracy is mentioned five times.

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

*No data*

### Salary / Finances

**Completely transparent salaries:** the salary system is aimed at fostering entrepreneurship. All salaries are completely transparent. Only 80% of the salary is paid out over the year, the rest is tied to a positive annual result for the whole company. The bonus system is based on the company’s success and includes a team bonus, where the teams decide how it is distributed.

**Ownership:** all employees can buy shares in the company, regardless of their role.

*“We share both risk and success. That means, we only pay 80% of salaries throughout the year. The remaining 20% are paid at the end of the year, depending on how the whole company is doing. At the same time we also share profits. Meaning, the majority of the profit is cashed out to employees,*

<sup>45</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, die Leute bleiben lange, bringen sich ein, überdurchschnittlich, mit dem Engagement. Wir sind als Schweizer Engineering-Firma ohne Ableger in Billiglohnländern, da sind wir sicher eher hochpreisig unterwegs. Und das heisst wir suchen diese Projekte, die anspruchsvoll sind, die Kundennähe brauchen. [...] Und das ist eben auch diese Wechselwirkung, die dann spielt. Und es ist so, wie jeder von uns behandelt werden möchte. Und wie jeder von uns arbeiten möchte. Und zugleich wird alles durch die Digitalisierung beschleunigt, das geht immer schneller, es wird komplexer, es braucht in diesem Sinne Vernetzung, um überhaupt diese Probleme lösen zu können, um diese Herausforderungen lösen zu können, die wir in der Firma und in den Projekten haben. Und das muss wie Hand in Hand gehen. Und indem man Leuten zu viel vorgibt, verhindert man eigentlich, dass, eben, wir sind eine Wissensorganisation, dass sich die Leute, ja, über das Kästchen hinausdenken.*

*and the minority goes into dividends. [...] And employees can buy shares as well, independently of their function [...]. As a result, 95% of shares are owned by active employees” (Keller / 0:05:08)<sup>46</sup>.*

*“Transparency for us goes as far as having transparent salaries. Everyone knows everyone else’s salaries” (Zirn / 0:04:17)<sup>47</sup>.*

## Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Collaboration between teams and HR:** a leadership team delegation (i.e. team leaders, department leaders and COO) define recruiting needs and passes search profiles on to HR. HR is responsible for advertising and the first screening of possible candidates (usually together with team leaders), which includes a technical assessment by the CTO in the second round. Vetted candidates are passed along to the teams who then make the final decision.

**Criteria for candidates:** the organisation’s way of working relies on employees who are proactive, committed, communicative and self-reliant. Hence, candidates are screened for these criteria. Team fit also includes having the same vision and a mutual understanding.

*“People who are self-reliant, who don’t have to be managed by dangling a carrot in front of their nose to get them moving a certain direction. The organisation is built around the idea of self-reliant people” (Keller / 0:22:44)<sup>48</sup>.*

*“The second most important thing, of course, are the technical skills. [...] And the third interview also covers team compatibility. They get to know the team and it’s more about their chemistry: do they have the same mentality? [...] And the team can turn the whole thing around and say no” (Zirn / 0:12:06)<sup>49</sup>.*

## On- / Offboarding

**Onboarding mentors and reviews:** new employees are paired with an onboarding mentor who has a similar role and is responsible for the

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<sup>46</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir sind beteiligt an Risiko und Erfolg. Beteiligt in diesem Sinn, dass wir nur 80% des Lohns unter dem Jahr auszahlen und risikobeteiligt sind. Die restlichen 20% bekommen wir alle Ende Jahr, abhängig vom Gesamtergebnis der Firma [...]. Und dafür sind wir darüber aus am Erfolg beteiligt. Also, der grössere Teil des Erfolgs wird an die Mitarbeiter verteilt und der kleinere Teil geht an die Aktionäre. [...] Und die Mitarbeiter können sich durch Aktienkäufe auch beteiligen, unabhängig von der Funktion [...] 95% der Aktien in der Hand von aktiven Ergon Mitarbeitern.*

<sup>47</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Diese Transparenz geht sogar so weit, dass unsere Löhne ja auch transparent sind. Also, jeder bei uns weiss auch, was der Andere verdient.*

<sup>48</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Jemand, der eigenverantwortlich committet ist, den man nicht führen muss und dem man nicht die Karotte hinhalten muss und sagen "geh dorthin". Die Organisation ist auch auf das ausgelegt.*

<sup>49</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Das Zweitwichtigste, das sind natürlich die Skills, die technischen. [...] Und in einem dritten Gespräch ist es dann noch eben die Teamkompatibilität. Dort lernen sie das Team kennen und dort geht es einfach noch darum, die Chemie zu spüren: Ticken die gleich [...]? Haben sie die gleichen Vorstellungen? [...] Das Team kann eigentlich nochmals alles umdrehen, kann nochmals Nein sagen.*

administrative, project and cultural onboarding. Regular onboarding reviews throughout the employment trial periods with both the onboarding mentor and the team leader focus on team integration, collaboration and communication skills.

## Development / Performance

**Teams not measured against each other:** while all projects have (openly accessible) KPIs, they are not used to measure team performance against each other, as clients and circumstances are not comparable. Instead, KPIs are used for learning purposes in the sense of continuous improvement.

**Development driven by individuals:** Voluntariness, freedom and trust are viewed as the cornerstones of training and development. Team leaders might encourage employees to invest in certain areas and act as mentors. However, it is up to individual employees how they want to spend their annual training budget. They are however expected to adhere to the maxim of continuous growth and learning. Brownbag sessions over lunchtime promote sharing of knowledge and networking. The company also offers a range of courses every year, depending on demand and organisational needs (e.g. leadership, language classes, personal development, coding skills).

*“And we don’t use project KPIs for performance management. We know that a customer from the manufacturing industry pays less than a customer from the financial sector [...]. But we still want to see those numbers in order to learn from them and improve. Furthermore, not all departments have the same targets for profitability and productivity. There might be an investment going on. So, it all gets subsumed” (Keller / 0:19:12)<sup>50</sup>.*

*“The training budget: ten days at one’s free disposal, without having to justify it. But of course there’s the expectation that it will be used for continuous learning” (Keller / 0:24:23)<sup>51</sup>.*

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<sup>50</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und wir haben ja keine Leistungsmessung an diesen KPIs. Wir wissen, dass ein Industriekunde weniger zahlt als ein Kunde in der Finanzbranche [...]. Aber, wir wollen diese Zahlen sehen, daraus lernen und uns weiterentwickeln. Und es ist auch so, dass nicht alle Abteilungen genau die gleiche Rentabilitäts- und Auslastungsziele haben. Wir haben vielleicht an einem Ort mehr Investitionsthemen und dann subsumieren wir das.*

<sup>51</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Das Weiterbildungsbudget: Zehn Tage zur eigenen Verfügung, worüber man eigentlich keine Rechenschaft ablegen muss, was man macht. Aber die Erwartung ist, dass man es nutzt, kontinuierliche Weiterentwicklung.*

*“The less you force something, the better it develops. [...] And this is a great example: the more freedom you give people, remove restrictions and trust people, the more they will give back” (Erdtner / 0:12:29)<sup>52</sup>.*

## Communication / Feedback

**Open and direct communication:** open communication is deemed the foundation of collaboration, which includes being able to voice your opinion and give direct feedback, while maintaining fairness and respect. This includes all layers of the organisation: Individuals, teams and the organisation itself. Quarterly “pulse checks” on employee happiness via survey is an example on organisational level. On team level, the chosen project management tool increases transparency to facilitate conversations around continuous improvement. The biggest challenge is defined as being able to openly address conflicts, which still seems to be a cultural impediment.

**Critical feedback as a challenge:** Giving direct, honest and especially critical feedback proves to be challenging for a lot of employees. Investing in fostering an open feedback culture is thus a current priority for the organisation, e.g. through training sessions and leadership by example.

**Performance reviews as conversation starters:** the annual performance reviews are structured around goals which are usually set by the employee and include soft skills. They are aimed at starting a conversation instead of providing one-directional feedback. The performance review itself is semi-structured and employees and teams can choose from a number of guides (provided by HR) that they can customise. Some teams also gather peer-feedback leading up to the annual performance reviews. Most employees also have a monthly or fortnightly catch-ups with their team leader to ensure an ongoing conversation around goals, collaboration and support.

*“And we have this transparency. With a dual meaning: both personal and organisational transparency” (Keller / 0:08:53)<sup>53</sup>.*

*“We make sure to not only talk properly to each other once a year and focus on our projects otherwise [...] What are the targets we want to reach? How*

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<sup>52</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und ich glaube, je weniger man solche Dinge forciert, umso besser entwickeln sie sich auch. [...] Und es ist für mich doch ein gutes Beispiel dafür: Je mehr Freiheiten wir in die Richtung gegeben werden und je weniger man sie thematisch einschränkt, umso mehr ist auch das Vertrauen da in die Leute, oder sind die Leute vertraut, dass sie das dann auch machen und etwas Gutes zurückbringen.*

<sup>53</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und wir haben ja Transparenz, und da wollten wir wirklich die Dualität von persönlich und organisatorisch.*

*are we doing? And that we regularly ask ourselves: how do we work together? What works well? Am I getting the support I need” (Keller / 0:28:41)<sup>54</sup>?*

*“We are struggling a bit with giving feedback. Maybe that has to do with Swiss culture. We rather hand out praise than actual feedback” (Zirn / 0:14:41)<sup>55</sup>.*

*“Well, I’d say we don’t have a terribly strong feedback culture in this company at the moment. My goal is... I try to foster a culture of immediate feedback, whether it’s something technical, code-related feedback, or something personal” (Erdtner / 0:21:45)<sup>56</sup>.*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Flat hierarchy, autonomous teams:** the structure based on flat hierarchy and stable, autonomous teams has been at the core of the organisation for over 20 years. Today, there are three layers of management: Management team, department leaders, team leaders.

**Stable, autonomous teams:** Teams consist of 8-20 team members and a team leader. Teams operate largely autonomous and self-reliant, and can draw on a support structure around them if need be (e.g. use HR expertise on an on-demand basis). There are initiatives to further strengthen teams and moving beyond a department structure, potentially resulting in fully self-organised teams with delegated authority. In this scenario, only (efficiency-focused) administrative task and a team of experts would remain centralised (e.g. as a centre of excellence to tap into and for setting the strategic direction).

*“We have this organisational form that was extremely innovative 20 years ago, when we made this move. [...] And we do implement small changes. [...] But the fundamentals of it have been around for ages. And we stick to that” (Zirn / 0:30:17)<sup>57</sup>.*

<sup>54</sup> Author’s own translation: *Also, einfach dass man nicht nur einmal im Jahr ein Gespräch führt und sonst quasi inhaltlich daran arbeitet. [...] Welche Ziele wollen wir auch erreichen? Wie sind wir unterwegs? Und dass wir uns auch regelmässig fragen: Wie ist die Zusammenarbeit? Was klappt gut? Wo fühle ich mich unterstützt, wo nicht?*

<sup>55</sup> Author’s own translation: *Wir tun uns ein wenig schwer mit dem Feedback-Geben. Das liegt vielleicht auch ein wenig an der Schweizer Kultur. Man lobt sich lieber als dass man sich Feedback gibt.*

<sup>56</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Aber es ist schon so, dass Feedback-Kultur generell, würde ich sagen, ist in der Firma nicht so stark ausgeprägt. [...] Also, deswegen ist auch mein Wunsch oder mein Ansatz, dass in dem Moment, in dem etwas passiert, egal ob das jetzt wirklich technisch bezogenes Feedback zu einem Stück Code, den man schreibt, oder ob es eine menschliche Geschichte ist, dass man relativ schnell auch der Person Bescheid gibt.*

<sup>57</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben ja diese Organisationsform, die sehr innovativ war, vor über 20 Jahren, haben wir eigentlich schon diesen Schritt gemacht. [...] Wir machen schon immer wieder kleinere Veränderungen. [...] Aber ich sage jetzt mal, die Grundform, die haben wir eigentlich schon brutal lange. Und behalten die bei.*



*“For example, we have departments, with a department leader. And I’d love to see self-organisation define itself in a way that maybe departments are no longer needed as such, and it’s all about the teams. And whether the teams have a team leader or work like cells, that’s not really relevant. But I also think that we still need a strategic crew that takes care of the strategic direction and what services we should offer accordingly. Marketing, and so forth, all these standard organisational topics. We still need these. But I’d love to see the teams be empowered further” (Erdtner / 0:44:31)<sup>58</sup>.*

## Self-concept of HR / People management

**Increasingly decentralised HR role:** the individual employee experience largely takes place within the teams. As a consequence, teams are increasingly empowered in people management and development aspects. Central HR experts merely act as aggregators and enablers, to prepare the ground for the teams, act as a supporting structure (e.g. as a point of escalation or to facilitate collegial consultation through fortnightly joint meeting with team leaders) and foster alignment via initiatives across the organisation (e.g. the need for company-wide training). Creating dedicated HR roles within teams is another idea that might further strengthen the decentralisation of people aspects. The main driver behind this ongoing process is the goal to be as close to the individual employee as possible. People aspects are also the last remaining aspect that has not been completely transferred to otherwise fully empowered teams. In such a future vision, a small team of experts could still be available on an on-demand basis, as a centre of excellence – coaching decentralised role holders.

**HR highly regarded:** HR is viewed as playing an essential role in the success of the organisation and inherently tied to strategic goals. The question is now how this vital role is distributed in practice. While HR today might still act as a translator between management and employees, for example pinpointing issues in regard to employee satisfaction, this aspect is becoming less and less important with the empowerment of teams.

*“And that’s really the aggregation of it all. Prepare the ground [...] So, it is essentially enabling. [...] Well, it’s a very distributed HR organisation [...] We*

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<sup>58</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben ja zum Beispiel Abteilungen, und die sind mit Abteilungsleiter bestückt, und ich würde mir jetzt wünschen, dass Selbstorganisation per se sich dadurch definiert, dass es vielleicht nicht mehr die Abteilung als solches braucht, sondern dass es Teams gibt. Und ob jetzt das Team einen Teamleiter haben muss, oder ob es als eigene Zelle gut funktioniert, das ist gar nicht so relevant. Ich finde, es braucht nach wie vor eine gewisse strategische Crew, die sich damit beschäftigt: Wo wollen wir hin? Was für Dienstleistungen bieten wir an? Marketing, und so weiter, all die klassischen Organisationsthemen. Die braucht man. Aber ich würde mir wünschen, dass die Teams mehr Empowerment kriegen.*

*don't want to centralise again when it comes to HR questions, for sure. Rather, we want to further optimise that decentralisation" (Keller / 0:29:34)<sup>59</sup>.*

*"I'd say, HR plays an extremely vital role at Ergon [...] HR is extremely valued, I'd say. [...] At the very least, because we take our employee happiness that serious, right" (Zirn / 0:21:42)<sup>60</sup>?*

*"To delegate more people responsibilities to the teams. [...] I'm currently thinking about how we could involve the teams even better in a lot of HR processes. [...] I'd love to drive it even further, maybe not even with an HR person per department, but with an HR person per team" (Zirn / 0:32:19)<sup>61</sup>.*

*"People aspects should be institutionalised within teams just as much as everything else" (Zirn / 0:35:01)<sup>62</sup>.*

*"And HR really only does things anymore that absolutely have to be done centrally. But, in this scenario, these central services will mainly include administration. And the specialists are directly in the teams. [...] At the utmost, you could have someone centrally with lots of expertise, who can act as a coach to the decentralised specialists" (Zirn / 0:38:39)<sup>63</sup>.*

## Decision-making capacity

**Delegated authority and participation:** Transparency and openly available information are deemed a prerequisite to employee participation and delegated authority: Only informed employees are able make decisions in the interests of the company. With a system of initiatives, surveys, ballots and task forces, the company ensures employee participation in decision-making.

**Empowered teams and individuals:** Individuals have a lot of freedom to tailor the work environment to their individual needs and strengths. Teams themselves have full responsibility for their projects, yet are expected to share learnings with the whole company. They also make the ultimate hiring

<sup>59</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Das ist eigentlich die Aggregation von allem. Prepare the ground. [...] Also, es ist eigentlich auch ein "Enablen". [...] Also, es ist stark eine verteilte HR-Organisation. [...] Aber sicher nicht mehr zentralisieren, was HR-Fragen anbelangt. Sondern uns mehr in dieser Dezentralisierung optimieren.*

<sup>60</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ich würde sagen in der Ergon spielt HR eine extrem zentrale Rolle. [...] HR hat da einen extrem, würde ich jetzt sagen, hohen Stellenwert. [...] Auch alleine schon deswegen, weil uns die Mitarbeiterzufriedenheit so wichtig ist, oder?*

<sup>61</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Mehr personelle Verantwortung in die Teams. [...] Aber, da bin ich mir noch am überlegen, auch bei vielen HR-Prozessen, wie wir sie noch mehr involvieren könnten. [...] Und jetzt möchte ich das noch weitertreiben, dass es jetzt nicht noch eine HR-Person ist in der Abteilung, sondern vielleicht eine HR-Person im Team, sogar.*

<sup>62</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Aber der Faktor Mensch, oder, der müsste ja genauso im Team institutionalisiert sein.*

<sup>63</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und im HR machst du einfach nur noch Dinge, die einfach zentral sein müssen. Aber, ich glaube eben, dass dann diese zentrale Stelle, dann immer mehr zu einer Administrativen, wahrscheinlich, wird. Und die Spezialisten sind dann eben in den Teams. [...] Oder höchstens, du hast an der zentralen Stelle noch jemand mit sehr viel Erfahrung, der dann die Dezentralen noch coacht in ihren Aufgaben.*

decisions based on team fit and are largely responsible for the development of their team members.

*“And if you want to truly participate in the advancement of the company, then your own development has to be beneficial for the company as well. And the only way to do that is by having all the information available, that would usually be held by the management board. You can only truly participate, if you have access to all information, right? Because that’s the only way you can make decisions in the company’s interest” (Zirn / 0:02:42)<sup>64</sup>.*

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<sup>64</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wenn du mitwirken willst, am Unternehmen und wie es sich entwickelt, dann soll ja diese Entwicklung nicht nur persönlich sein, sondern auch für das Unternehmen sinnvoll. Und damit du das machen kannst, musst du auch all diese Unternehmensinformationen haben, wie sie jetzt eine Geschäftsleitung hat oder ein Verwaltungsrat. [...] Und aufgrund dieser Informationen kann er dann eben auch mitbestimmen, oder? Nur wenn er diese weiss, kann er sich wirklich im Sinne von Ergon entscheiden.*

#### 4.5. Humankind

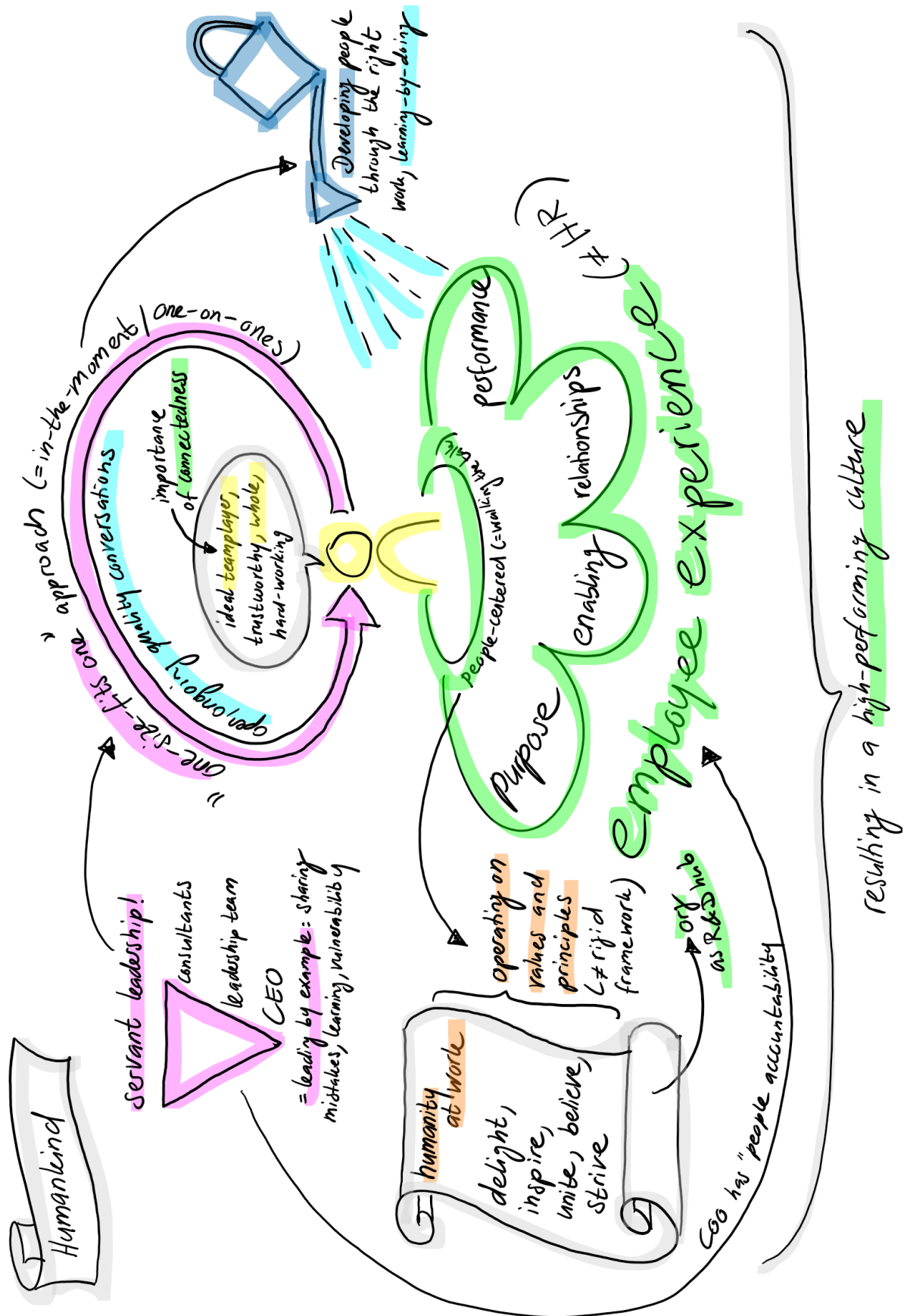


Figure 17 Concept map: Humankind  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Investment in relationship-building:** the organisation deliberately invests in relationship-building, as it believes in people's need to be a part of a community. Employees hence see themselves as a part of a collective rather than being an individual consultant. Employees also act as a supporting network for each other, as they are often on client site by themselves. Building trusting relationships is viewed as the key to being able to both recognise and challenge each other. This also facilitates close collaboration, which is deemed essential to yielding better results.

*"We share our knowledge and embrace development. We are greater than the sum of our parts. So, it's really important one for us, internally and externally. [...] And we try to be quite deliberate about creating opportunities to come back and collaborate. [...] And that's important for us internally, because we know that people have a need for affiliation. And we also know that collaboration breeds stronger results" (Ponti / 0:05:08).*

*"We just naturally invest a lot in relationships here. [...] We really are quite intentional about fostering those opportunities to build connections" (Ponti / 0:32:55).*

*"I would say that the majority of our people here could all be out as independent consultants, but they choose to be part of Humankind. [...] They want to be part of something. They want to have support. They want to be able to share ideas and therefore get better ideas" (Gadd / 0:02:25).*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Operating based on purpose and principles:** the organisation's purpose (i.e. *humanity at work*) acts as an overall driver and is based around recognising humans as feeling, thinking, whole individuals. Instead of using rigid frameworks, the organisation embeds principles into practices, which again focuses on people as whole persons who are allowed to bring their emotions to work and want to feel connected. The organisation ensures a connection to the purpose and values by incorporating them into their consulting practices and hence using them both internally and externally.

**Core values:** **delight** (i.e. being welcoming, supporting and engaging while being humble at eye-level), **inspire** (i.e. redefining, innovating, being cutting-edge and accepting failure as a part of it), **unite** (i.e. collaborating and sharing

knowledge, holistic development), **believe** (i.e. trust, support and lack of judgement) and **strive** (i.e. aiming high, adding value and challenging constructively).

**High-trust culture and empowerment:** the organisation's high-trust culture for example manifests in highly autonomous and flexible work arrangements and the transparent and open sharing of information (including regular finance and strategy updates). The organisation's approach to a great employee experience is built around removing barriers that prevent them from being their best selves. The organisation operates on the principles of collaboration, shared power and decision-making as well as taking ownership of topics one is passionate about – allowing individuality and diversity.

*"That's really about recognising humanity and the importance of individual differences, the impact on people and how they're feeling and thinking" (Ponti / 0:02:40).*

*"We work really hard to challenge ourselves every day when we're working with clients. To say, OK, how are we bringing humanity to work through this solution that we're designing with our clients? Is this approach I'm recommending, is it the right thing to do? [...] So there's a real connection to that purpose" (Ponti / 0:15:10).*

*"We all contribute to it. It's only possible with every single person here. And so, if we all have that information that we need, you can also see the results of your hard work. [...] There's no need to keep it a secret" (Ponti / 0:26:25).*

### Image of the human person

**People as whole:** People are viewed as authentic, vulnerable and whole, which includes that they make mistakes. They are also expected to bring their whole selves to work, including all their emotions.

**Baseline of trust:** People are assumed to be supportive, trustworthy and reliable at heart. This also implies that they want to do the right thing. Hence, trust is a baseline and does not have to be earned. This also includes treating employees like capable adults. In case they might be underperforming, something might be preventing them to be their best selves (e.g. unclear role, unclear process or leadership issues).

*"Because I genuinely believe that people in general want to come to work and do an awesome job. People like to perform" (Gadd / 0:15:49).*

*“And I say this all the time, but I literally fall in love with people. I fall in love with all of my team members. I fall in love with clients” (0:16:37).*

*“I'd hate to be the sort of person that thought the worst of people, you know? I think that's not an enjoyable way to live” (Gadd / 0:18:06).*

### Definition of leadership

**Servant leadership:** a leader's role is defined by enabling others to be happy and successful, by supporting them and creating the environment they need to thrive, i.e. dispersing power, authority and ownership as much as possible. Constant self-reflection and leading by example are also a part of any leadership role and includes challenging your own communication skills and where you might fall short yourself. Leaders are responsible for an employee's development by ensuring the right type (and amount) of work is available. Leadership is also viewed as something that needs to be tailored to the individual needs of every individual, e.g. how much guidance or one-on-one conversations are needed.

*“How does leadership work? We have a one size fits one approach. So, it really depends on what works for the employee” (Ponti / 0:17:13).*

*“We lead as much by example as we do by ideas. And that's a really key part of what we're about” (Gadd / 0:03:43).*

*“And I really believe in that servant leadership. Where I'm at the bottom. [...] Because I just think, as a leader, my job is to enable people to be awesome and be happy. And to then give them the environment, give them the tools” (Gadd / 0:06:07).*

### Learning organisation

**Change as a constant:** Questioning the status quo and pushing oneself out of one's comfort zone are basic principles, whether on an individual or an organisational level. This includes accepting failure as a part of wanting to be on the leading edge, while combining inspiration from other organisations with theory, literature and intuition. New ideas are tested within the company before being used in client work. A future goal includes a dedicated internal R&D space as a part of the organisation's own employee experience.

**Error culture:** the organisation makes sharing mistakes and learning a habit, e.g. by incorporating it into weekly team meetings or project retrospectives.

The leadership team deliberately shares failure to encourage a culture of vulnerability and normalising mistakes as a learning opportunity.

*"It's really about pushing the status quo and really challenging our clients out of their comfort zones. [...] For us, that's challenging us outside of our comfort zone and really, you know, eating our own dog food" (Ponti / 0:04:45).*

*"We also reflect on the learnings... [...] And that's about making it OK to share. [...] So it's constantly part of the culture, we share our own... The leadership team will make a conscious decision really to share our learnings in the moment" (Ponti / 0:23:45).*

*"That whole, bring your whole selves to work. Vulnerability, authenticity. [...] I fail publicly here all the time. I make mistakes. I admit them. It's just part of leadership. You've just got to do that. Because it makes everyone else feel comfortable" (0:09:04).*

*"And I'm just really upfront about that, because there's no point in trying to bullshit. Like, we're all humans. We're all trying to do our best. The reality is when you are growing a business, you make loads of mistakes. So, I think leading by example is the best way though" (Gadd / 0:20:31).*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Own work experiences in other organisations:** the experience to work in organisations that claimed to be people-centred but whose actions did not follow are an inspiration for the leadership team to do it differently – and show the impact it has on both the people and the business.

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Team dynamics:** Patrick Lencioni's concept of the *ideal team player* is referred to concerning the recruiting process and what to look for in candidates.

**Organisational form:** Holacracy is mentioned six times.

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

*No data*



## Salary / Finances

**Financial transparency:** all key financial figures and are shared with employees on a monthly basis.

**Future goals (salary and ownership):** as salary data is currently the only financial figure that is not openly available, it is likely to go transparent in the future as well. Shared ownership of the company is also reported to be a future goal (i.e. employee shareholders) to really make employees a part of the organisation's journey.

## Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Emphasis on employer branding:** the company values are reported to be the main element of attracting new employees. Since attracting top talent is crucial for the company's success, employer branding is regarded as a priority.

**Collaborative hiring process:** the leadership team discusses hiring needs and hands over the search profile to a recruitment agency (who is a sister company to the organisation). The search profile has been completed together with the team to identify the skills needed. The recruitment agency then shortlists potential candidates, who are invited to a first interview with two members of the leadership team. During the second interview, they meet more people from the team.

**Main goal for candidates:** the main goal is to ensure candidates are a great fit for the team and vice-versa. To ensure alignment with company values, the organisation uses Patrick Lencioni's framework of the *ideal team player*: ideal candidates are *hungry* (i.e. motivated), *humble* (i.e. ego-free) and *smart* (i.e. strong performing).

*"We ask questions specifically to tease some of those things out. [...] We're pretty consistent and rigorous with questions" (Ponti / 0:51:33).*

*"We have five core values, which are very much embedded into the way that we practise, the way that we behave, who we are, how we hire. In fact, I would say they're one of the number one things that help us to attract staff as well, because they're on our website. And I think people get a feel from them when they interact with us" (Gadd / 0:01:06).*

*"Because if we cannot attract and retain our top talent, we will not be able to deliver to our clients" (Gadd / 0:30:13).*

## On- / Offboarding

**Relationship-building and setting employees up for success:** Building connections as fast as possible is kickstarted by one-on-one chats with each member of the team, including the CEO (who uses the opportunity to introduce the organisation's history and core values). New employees have an onboarding mentor who guides them through the process. The emphasis on building relationships also serves as an introduction to the organisation's way of working, where collaboration is the baseline: Clients pay a premium to tap into a collective.

**Crucial onboarding experience:** the onboarding experience is seen as the most important opportunity to set up new employees for success, which is why the process is very structured and meticulously planned in advance.

*"We've let her know, for her first week and a half, her number one priority is just building connections. And so she's got a one-on-one set up with each member of the team" (Ponti / 0:33:00).*

## Development / Performance

**Developing employees through the right work:** Understanding what each employee is passionate about and what areas they want to develop in is reported to be the prerequisite for on-the-job development. To ensure employees have the right type and amount of work is seen as a part of leadership roles. Employee development hence is directly tied to client projects and almost entirely on-the-job. In-house training sessions are largely facilitated by team members. There is a budget per employee for off-the-job training, which can be used rather flexible (e.g. conferences or courses).

**Skills development driven by organisational and individual needs:** the need to develop a certain skill might come from a capabilities gap from a project or strategic point of view, or directly from an individual employee. Individual skills are currently documented by using a spreadsheet.

**Ongoing conversations instead of annual reviews:** Employees reported in a survey that they prefer ongoing coaching and development over formal feedback. This includes ensuring employees get opportunities to learn through the projects they work on. As a result, there are no annual performance reviews, but leaders will keep an eye on billable hours and workload and raise potential issues directly with individuals. Performance on an organisational and team level is shared daily.

There is a strong belief that people love to be part of a high-performing and growing organisation, yet at the same time it can prove to be rather stressful. Balancing individual growth, organisational growth and development can be a challenge.

*“We don't have a formal learning and development program. But hands down, the best way to learn is by doing it” (Ponti / 0:27:18).*

*“As we're working through our strategy and identify who's our core customer. And then, what [...] problems are we trying to solve for them? Therefore, what services do we have? We're also identifying: what skills and capabilities do we need? [...] And if there's a big gap, then it's: OK, we need a way to develop these skills. [...] Or it might be, someone else could come up and say: hey, I really want to focus on this” (Ponti / 0:29:47).*

*“People love being part of something that's really high performing. People love being part of something that's growing. [...] So, there are a lot of really positive things, but it's not easy... It's a rollercoaster ride. It's just not an easy environment” (Gadd / 0:24:37).*

## Communication / Feedback

**Ongoing and direct feedback:** as a baseline, employees have one-on-one coaching conversations with their leaders every month. However, some might need more guidance than others, and weekly check-ins are also common. Feedback on the organisation is gathered every week, using a software called *Joyous*, with the aim to open up a dialogue between employees and leaders. The organisation's focus lies on creating quality conversations and building trusting relationships that make it possible to share mistakes and recognise each other's contributions.

*“I guess in terms of a few actions that we do proactively, to create that. So, obviously they're not ground-breaking: we've got the one-on-one, we've got the tools. So, even just, we make really deliberate decisions around having really clear open dialogues” (Ponti / 0:22:39).*

*“We fundamentally believe that, performance, it's going to be most effective in the moment. [...] That's an ongoing conversation that gets woven into a regular one-on-one or as requested” (Ponti / 0:48:10).*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Principles instead of rigid frameworks:** as the organisation is growing, there is a need for an operational system to ensure both customer and employee experience. However, the organisation chooses to operate based on principles rather than using rigid frameworks. For example, it focuses on quality conversations and transparency instead of building restrictive processes.

**Leadership structure:** the founder and CEO expresses a strong dislike for organisational structures based on power and hierarchy. Previously having experimented with Holacracy or a completely flat structure, a leadership structure has recently been implemented. As a result, a leadership team looks after employees in three different service streams. The new role of COO is accountable for people aspects of the organisation – a newly created accountability. The CEO uses the metaphor of an inverted triangle for their current structure: the CEO sits at the bottom, symbolising servant leadership. Thought leadership is also distributed across teams based on interest and skills (e.g. two employees who currently curate the wellbeing space).

**Challenges of a growing organisation:** the constant reprioritising between a focus on revenue and growth versus investing on internal projects creates constant tension. For example, the Holacracy experiment is believed to have failed due to not being able to dedicate enough time and energy internally.

*“About three years ago we were sort at a size where we needed an org[anisation] chart. And it was for new people coming in, to explain where people sit in the organisation. And I asked my designer at the time, can you pull together a chart for us? And he delivered me a traditional hierarchical structure with me at the top. And I, literally, it was like I almost had an allergic reaction. I was, like, what is that? Everything about it felt wrong. And so, I asked him just to flip it upside down. And I really believe in that servant leadership” (Gadd / 0:05:55).*

*“I love the concept behind Holacracy and what it stands for and the values behind it. And just modern organisation structures that aren't all about power and hierarchy” (Gadd / 0:21:09).*

### Self-concept of HR / People management

**Employee experience instead of HR:** the company's own employee experience (which is used as a synonym for HR) is an accountability of the

COO. The COO describes the approach as being fundamentally different to traditional HR, which seems characterised by ticking boxes and chasing compliance without adding any real value. The organisation is convinced that a leading-edge employee experience (that keeps up with technological and societal changes) leads to better business outcomes, including the ability to attract top talent. The organisation created their own model for employee experience, which is used both internally and in client work. It includes four types of experiences: *Purpose* (e.g. vision, purpose and how people believe in it), *relationship* (i.e. connections), *enabling* (e.g. physical workplace, tools, information available) and *performance* (e.g. recognition, sense of accomplishment, opportunity for improvement and mastery). Human-centred design is used to embed values in practices.

**Shared responsibility versus accountability:** the organisation believes that while everyone is contributing to and responsible for a great employee experience, there also needs to be accountability. The role accountable for a certain area takes ownership of it, which includes continuous improvement (e.g. of the onboarding process).

*“So, rightly or wrongly, HR in the past has had a bit of a reputation for not adding value. Right? It’s compliance. It’s ticking boxes. And that’s something we actually overtly say: we aren’t that” (Ponti / 0:06:53).*

*“I fundamentally believe that a great employee experience leads to better business outcomes” (Ponti / 0:11:27).*

*“It’s like, in the outside world we are in 2019 in a lot of ways. But then you come into the workplace and it’s like 1999” (Ponti / 0:53:13).*

*“We really believe that one of our core competencies is for us to have an exemplary, world class employee experience. [...] and also what we believe in: Employee experience equals customer experience. [...] We practise, what we preach” (Gadd / 0:30:00).*

*“I believe that everyone is accountable for the employee experience. And everyone contributes. And definitely. Everyone’s accountable for culture. You can’t have one person that’s the culture owner” (Gadd / 0:32:01).*

## Decision-making capacity

**Shared authority:** despite having a formal leadership structure, thought leadership is also distributed across teams and based meritocracy (i.e.

individual skills and interests). Sharing leadership tasks is aimed at avoiding bottlenecks for decision-making and ensures to bring different perspectives to the table (e.g. innovation versus commercialisation).

#### 4.6. Liip

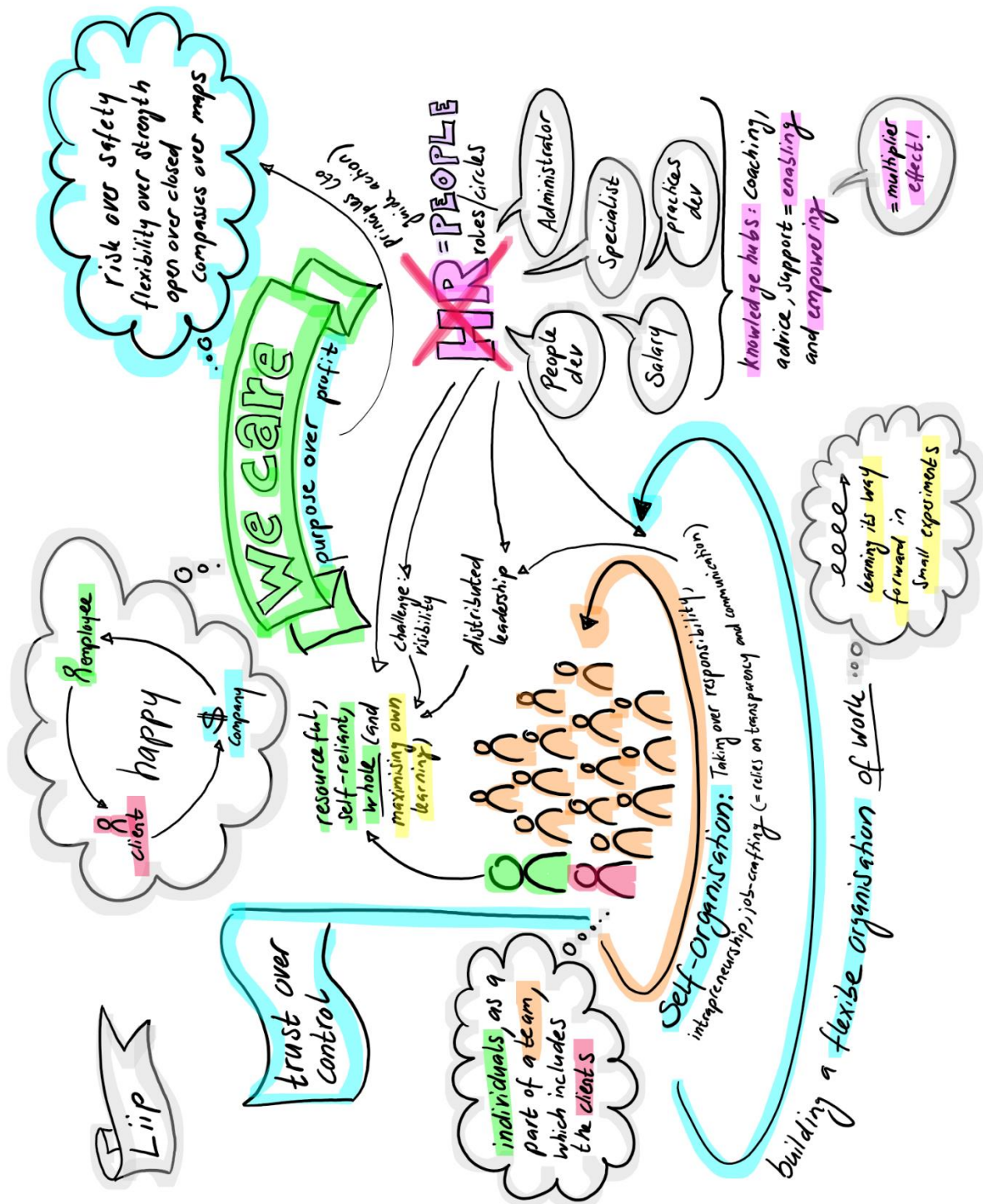


Figure 18 Concept map: Liip  
Own figure



## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Importance of personal relationships:** Self-organisation is believed to rely on people knowing each other on a personal level and having meaningful connections that ensure open communication. This principle expands to the client side, who is as actively involved in project work as possible.

**Individuals as part of a team:** when recruiting, individuals are always assessed with a team fit focus and how they will complement an existing skill set.

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Purpose before profit:** the three goals as an organisation are *happy employees, happy clients* and *happy company* – in exactly that order. It reflects the priorities of the organisation and emphasises that all perspectives are needed to create a sustainable organisation. This also aligns with motivational theory that replaces monetary incentives or status with freedom as a main driver (e.g. being able to pursue your purpose and taking over responsibility for your own journey).

**People at the forefront:** the founders' main driver was to create a *caring* company. As a guiding principle, the company has to serve its employees and must never exploit them. The organisation believes that people aspects will become increasingly important for any organisation's future, regardless of the industry. Insofar, the organisation aspires to be an avant-garde organisation.

**Change as a value-driven constant:** Change is guided by core values. According to the organisation, these values need to be constantly addressed and embedded in practice. The use of storytelling aids in making principles less abstract and ambiguous (e.g. during onboarding). Employees are also encouraged to hold each other accountable for living up to these values. The challenge of continuous improvement includes a constant re-evaluation of efficiency versus effectiveness, especially for internal processes. In this context, practice is more important than theory, creating a playful culture with a serious intent that experiments and learns its way forward.

**Self-organisation:** the concept of self-organisation is applied to all layers and aspects of the organisation. The role-based structure allows employees to take over full responsibility for areas they are interested and skilled in.



**Trust over control:** Trust is applied as a basic principle and results in an effort to limit policies and rules to a minimum.

**Transparency:** full transparency across the whole organisation is founded in the belief that employees need access to all information in order to take over responsibility and make sensible decisions in the company's interest.

*"The company has to serve the employees, and not the other way round"  
(Perroulaz / 0:03:33)<sup>65</sup>.*

*"Namely, we want three things as a company. And in exactly this order, this is extremely important. We want happy employees. Content and excited customers. And healthy finances. [...] Hence, we want content employees, first and foremost. Happy employees. And we achieve this by doing certain things"  
(Perroulaz / 0:04:11)<sup>66</sup>.*

*"Because people are motivated by something different. And not by, or less, by validation. Or monetary incentives. On the contrary, they are motivated by freedom and autonomy" (Perroulaz / 0:43:07)<sup>67</sup>.*

*"Purpose is more important than profit. [...] Trust before control. Practice before theory" (Perroulaz / 0:49:22).<sup>68</sup>*

## Image of the human person

**Principle of the whole person:** the organisation emphasises taking people seriously and viewing them as whole persons, with all their emotions and different roles in- and outside of the workplace. It acknowledges that people's situation, skills and priorities change over time and demands the workplace to enable such changes (e.g. by flexible working models, workload, fluid roles).

**People as trustworthy adults:** the organisation commits to treating people as adults that can be trusted with responsibility, without patronising or micromanaging them.

**People learn by making mistakes:** People have to make their own experiences in order to learn. They should not be safeguarded from failure.

<sup>65</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Die Firma ist für die Leute da, die hier arbeiten, und nicht umgekehrt.*

<sup>66</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Nämlich, dass wir vor allem drei Dinge wollen als Unternehmen. Und genau in dieser Reihenfolge, und das ist extrem wichtig. Wir wollen glückliche Mitarbeiter. Zufriedene und begeisterte Kunden. Und gesunde Finanzen. [...] Also, als Allererstes wollen wir zufriedene Mitarbeiter. Und glückliche Mitarbeiter. Und das erreichen wir natürlich durch gewisse Dinge, und wie wir die machen.*

<sup>67</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Weil die Leute, weil die Zufriedenheit von einem anderen Ort herkommt. Und gar nicht, oder weniger über diese Anerkennungslinie läuft. Und die Monetäre. Sondern mehr über die Freiheitslinie.*

<sup>68</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Sinnhaftigkeit ist wichtiger als Gewinn. [...] Vertrauen vor Kontrolle. Praxis vor Theorie.*

*“That we take people seriously is an important baseline. We take them seriously as whole people. Not as people who do their job while hiding behind a professional mask. But that we see them as people with all their rough edges, and experiences outside of work. As whole people who have their ups and downs. As people who can have different roles” (Perroulaz / 0:06:02)<sup>69</sup>.*

*“We treat the people who work with us like adults. [...] Why are so many companies patronising adults? This isn’t the case outside of work, so why are we doing this” (Perroulaz / 0:07:16)<sup>70</sup>?*

## Definition of leadership

**Distributed leadership:** instead of relying on a few leaders to make decisions, who might be far away from the subject matter, distributed leadership ensures that everyone in the organisation makes decisions about things they are likely to have close knowledge of – thus maximising the organisation’s decision-making capacity. This shift depends on a system of coaching, advice-seeking and learning from mistakes. Distributed leadership demands a drastic behavioural shift from former leaders, who are now encouraged to enable others to make decisions instead of acting as trouble shooters. Initially, decisions might take longer, as the organisation is transitioning.

*“Before, I used to have a relatively standard, modern leadership position. [...] You have to embark on this transition at some point. And some parts of it were very easy and also very comfortable, because you don’t have to do certain things anymore. But other parts of were difficult, especially not falling back into a pattern of trying to help others, really reining yourself back. [...] And you also have to train the pattern of: why are you asking me this? In what role are you approaching me? [...] Especially when you are used to solving problems quickly. [...] In this case, it suddenly gets more complicated, because you realise that you first have think about: what role do I have? Am I doing this or not? [...] Which also means that, initially, things are going to take longer. As simple as that” (Perroulaz / 0:11:18)<sup>71</sup>.*

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<sup>69</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und ein wichtiges Credo dort ist, dass wir die Leute ernst nehmen. Und ganz ernst nehmen. Als Menschen und nicht in ihrem Job, mit ihrer Maske, mit der sie jeden Tag hierhin kommen, um zu arbeiten. Sondern mit ihren Ecken und Kanten und damit, wie es gerade zuhause läuft und nebendran läuft. Dass wir sie einfach ganz wahrnehmen, einerseits, und dass wir sie als Menschen wahrnehmen, die halt Ups und Downs haben können. Und als Menschen wahrnehmen, die auch verschiedene Rollen haben können.*

<sup>70</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir behandeln die Menschen, die Leute, die bei uns arbeiten, als Erwachsene. [...] Wieso bevormunden die Unternehmen die erwachsenen Personen dermassen? Im privaten Leben ist das ja auch nicht der Fall, warum machen wir das eigentlich.*

<sup>71</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Weil, ich hatte vorher eigentlich eine relativ klassische, moderne Führungsaufgabe. [...] Aber diese Transformation, die musst du dann natürlich irgendwie machen. Und dann, ja, das war zum Teil sehr einfach und auch sehr angenehm, weil du gewisse Dinge einfach nicht mehr machen musst. Zum Teil auch schwierig, dass man nicht immer wieder in diese Hilfsmuster zurückfällt und sich wirklich muss zurücknehmen. [...] Und eben auch dieses Muster aneignen mit: Wieso fragst du mich das? In welcher Rolle kommst du zu mir? [...] Aber wenn du dir einfach gewohnt bist, dass alles sehr schnell*

*"I often get asked: does it really work without any kind of leadership? Without anyone making decisions? Does it really work? Well, we all make decisions all the time anyway" (Lorenzi / 0:07:55)<sup>72</sup>.*

## Learning organisation

**Organisation as a dynamic and fluid system:** the ultimate goal is described as creating an organisation structured around the work that has to be done. The structure itself needs to be flexible and allow for quick adjustment, to ensure it matches current needs and aligns with everyday workflows. As such, the organisation resembles a dynamic system, always in transition – as opposed to having a stable structure that calls for periodic disruptive re-organisation.

**Maximising learning through autonomy:** by principle, all role holders are empowered to run experiments and implement changes in their own realm of autonomy, whenever they sense tension or have ideas for improvements. They are also expected to make their own mistakes and experiences, as this is believed to facilitate learning and help them articulate their needs better. For that reason, employees are responsible for maximising their own learning. At the same time, it is viewed as the company's role to remove impediments and restrictions around learning opportunities.

*"Namely, making sure we have a flexible organisation. Where people can do what they like doing and what they are good at, where they can truly participate and where they can also change" (Perroulaz / 0:06:47)<sup>73</sup>.*

*"You just have to bear with it. [...] I always say it's a bit like raising children. You cannot save your children from making the same mistakes you have done. They have to make their own mistakes. And it's no different in a company. [...] They have to make their own experiences. And even if you know from the top of your head: been there, done that, that's not going to fare well. [...] It's this parallel function of: letting them try stuff, so they can learn from it, and also learn how to better articulate their needs" (Perroulaz / 0:25:49)<sup>74</sup>.*

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geht und du die Probleme gerade lösen kannst. [...] Dann wird es plötzlich dann auch komplizierter, weil du merkst, dass du zuerst dir überlegen musst: Was hast du für eine Rolle? Machst du das oder machst du das nicht? [...] Und das geht in einer ersten Phase einfach länger. Schlichtweg.

<sup>72</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ich werde häufig gefragt: Ja, aber ohne Führung, funktioniert dann das? Und ohne jemanden, der Entscheidungen trifft, funktioniert dann das? Also, Entscheidungen treffen ja sowieso alle.*

<sup>73</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Nämlich, dass wir dafür sorgen, dass wir eine Organisation haben, die flexibel ist. Wo sich die Leute mit dem, was sie gerne machen, und gut können, einbringen können und sich auch verändern können.*

<sup>74</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Genau, man muss das einfach ein bisschen aushalten. [...] Das ist ein bisschen wie Kindererziehung, sage ich immer. Du kannst deine Kinder auch nicht vor allem bewahren, dass sie die Fehler, die du gemacht hast und die du in deinem Speicher hast, dass sie die nicht machen müssen. Sie müssen die trotzdem selber machen. Und das ist in einem Unternehmen nicht anders. [...] Und die müssen ihre Erfahrungen machen. Und selbst wenn du im Hinterkopf, wenn da alles sagt: Been there, done that, kommt nicht gut. [...] Und diese zwei Parallelfunktionen: Man hat sie ausprobieren und machen lassen, sie haben daraus gelernt und können ihre Bedürfnisse besser artikulieren.*

*“Well, it’s the whole point of this system that you can do things immediately. [...] Whenever they are needed. And not ahead of it. You do something when you realise: OK, something’s not right anymore, we have to do something differently” (Perroulaz / 0:31:52)<sup>75</sup>.*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Being value-based from the start:** the organisation takes pride in the fact that it had a strong focus on company culture since its founding days and that its core-values have not changed since then.

**Joy of empowerment:** Empowering others and seeing them take on responsibility sparks joy in two ways. It aligns with the company’s values and image of people, and also removes bottlenecks for decision-making.

*“The fact that we have this foundation of culture and values makes working this self-organised a lot easier. We’ve always had that. It’s just what we believe in. What are founders believed in, back in the day” (Perroulaz / 0:00:05)<sup>76</sup>.*

*“For two reasons. Because it sparks such joy to see people being motivated and taking on responsibility. On the one hand. And it that it becomes completely natural. And on the other hand, because it’s just such an enormous relief. As simple as that” (Perroulaz / 0:14:47)<sup>77</sup>.*

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Organisational form:** Holacracy is mentioned in 14 direct references, alongside various remarks of self-organisation.

**Employee empowerment:** Reinhard K. Sprenger's is quoted for his theory that many organisations patronise their employees and treat them like children.

<sup>75</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, das ist ja die Idee an diesem System, dass man das eben sofort kann. [...] Wenn man es braucht. Nicht irgendwie auf Vorrat. Sondern wenn man merkt: OK, jetzt stimmt es nicht mehr, jetzt müssen wir irgendetwas anders machen.*

<sup>76</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, dass wir so eine kulturelle Basis haben, eine Wertbasis haben, macht sehr viel einfacher, dass wir so selbstorganisiert arbeiten können. Das haben wir seit immer schon. Das ist einfach unsere Überzeugung. Das war die Überzeugung der Gründer, dazumal.*

<sup>77</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Aus zwei Gründen. Weil es extrem Freude macht zu sehen, wie Leute motiviert sind und Verantwortung übernehmen. Einerseits. Und auf der anderen Seite, dass es wie zu, also, parallel dazu, das wie zu einer Selbstverständlichkeit wird. Und auf der anderen Seite, weil es natürlich wahnsinnig entlastet. Schlichtweg.*

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

**Role of HR Administrator:** the role of HR Administrator is reported to be responsible for administrative tasks. These include for example: organising gift cards or office keys, booking meetings, sending out surveys or insurance registration, sending out invites for job interviews or drafting employment reference letters.

**Automation of administrative tasks:** it is the organisation's ambition to make administrative processes as stream-lined, user-friendly, digitised and automated as possible. To ensure that, they are being frequently overhauled by an HR expert and a service designer. The role-based approach is also reported to incentivise areas such as finances or HR to automate, outsource or eliminate tasks (if there is no value added) instead of defending the status quo. This is due to the vast potential of other roles and tasks people could do.

*"I try to digitise as much as possible. And to improve processes, making them user-friendlier as well. This is where I collaborate with a service designer that we have internally" (Lorenzi / 0:22:46)<sup>78</sup>.*

*"You can challenge all statistics that we do, everything, and ask: why are we doing this? Do we have a goal? And once again: why are we doing this? OK, then we could just leave it be. [...] And that's something I extremely value in this environment" (Lorenzi / 0:25:35)<sup>79</sup>.*

### Salary / Finances

**Full financial transparency:** the organisation operates with full financial transparency, including all salaries, spending and expenses. This is the counterpart to all role holders being empowered to spend whatever they deem necessary and reasonable to reach the goal of their roles and circles. Budgeting is replaced by transparency and the fact that all employees are tied to the financial loss or gain of the organisation.

*"Especially in self-organisation, this also means that you need happy finances. You can't just focus on personal fulfilment for the sake of it, but it has to be somehow aligned with the company goals and your roles, and make sense*

<sup>78</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ich versuche, möglichst viel auch zu digitalisieren. Und eben auch Prozesse zu verbessern. Und eben auch user-friendlier zu machen. Dort arbeite ich auch viel mit einer Service-Designerin zusammen, die bei uns intern ist.*

<sup>79</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Sondern du kannst jede Statistik, oder alles, das kannst du challengen und fragen: Wieso machen wir das? Haben wir ein Ziel? Und dann noch einmal: Wieso machen wir das? Dann können wir es einfach lassen. [...] Und das sind schon Dinge, die ich von der Umgebung her extrem schätze.*

*from a financial point of view. [...] You can make decisions, but within your roles” (Lorenzi / 0:03:07)<sup>80</sup>.*

*“We really have an enormous amount of financial transparency, compared to other companies” (Lorenzi / 0:05:50)<sup>81</sup>.*

## Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Way of working crucial for talent attraction:** the company mainly attracts candidates that are intrigued by self-organisation.

**Being able to cope with self-organisation as a criterion:** the company relies on hiring candidates that are likely to thrive within self-organisation. As most hires are software developers, who are familiar with the concept through agile software development, they simply have to realise that the whole company now operates around the same principles. The focus of the whole recruiting process lies on making the company’s way of working as explicit as possible, to act as a filter.

**Team fit and skills fit:** another focus of recruiting lies on a candidate’s fit within the team and whether the candidates brings the skills that team needs.

**Team-led recruiting:** recruiting is done by the teams, yet with the support of an HR Specialist. Early in the transition to full self-organisation, teams wanted to do all recruiting themselves. After realising how much time and effort goes into it, teams learned to see the value and benefits of HR knowhow and support. Letting teams make their own experiences also helped to expose training needs. HR Specialists now act as coaches to the teams and set the standards of what information has to be disclosed to candidates in interviews.

*“I think we explicitly attract people who want to work like this. [...] And maybe because that’s also a bit of a future-relevant topic. And a bit fancy. [...] And maybe they’re also fed up to be directed around by a boss who doesn’t really have a lot more expertise. [...]. And during the whole recruiting process, we really make a point of explaining what it really means to work like that. And we really use the recruiting process as a filter” (Perroulaz / 0:16:27)<sup>82</sup>.*

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<sup>80</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und das heisst aber gerade auch in einer Selbstorganisation, eben, die Finanzen müssen glücklich sein. Das heisst, du kannst dich nicht einfach bis zu jedem Grad irgendwie selbstverwirklichen, sondern es muss irgendwie mit den Unternehmenszielen und irgendwie mit deinen Rollen und finanziell auch Sinn machen. [...] Entscheide du, in deiner Rolle.*

<sup>81</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Aber ich denke, dadurch, dass wir wirklich, im Vergleich zu anderen Unternehmen, eigentlich eine recht krasse Transparenz haben.*

<sup>82</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Ich denke, ziehen wir explizit Leute an, die das wollen. [...] Und weil das halt ein bisschen ein Zukunftsthema ist. Und ein bisschen fancy. [...] Und vielleicht die Nase voll haben, sich irgendwie herumdirigieren zu*

*“The most important thing is team fit. And that you bring the skills the team needs” (Perroulaz / 0:17:48)<sup>83</sup>.*

*“Recruiting is done by the teams. With the support and the knowhow of an HR Specialist. [...] This, too, needed a transitional phase [...] Well, we abandoned them a bit initially, to make them realise what they actually need. And that wasn’t a bad strategy, because now they really value our service and also make use of it” (Perroulaz / 0:23:09)<sup>84</sup>.*

*“I’m asking myself: what’s the benefit of having an HR person at a job interview, unless the HR person acts as a coach for the person who can also assess the candidate on a technical level” (Lorenzi / 0:27:42)<sup>85</sup>?*

## On- / Offboarding

**Ensuring culture fit:** after the recruiting, the onboarding period is viewed as the second filtering period to ensure new employees are a cultural match.

**Focus on company culture and self-organisation:** learning how the company operates is the main focus of the onboarding period, alongside internalising cultural principles (e.g. trust over control).

**Onboarding mentors:** the role of onboarding mentor is a multi-staffed role and specific to a certain branch. They frequently check in with new employees and help them navigate within the company (e.g. building networks, accepting roles) and ensure their participation in compulsory training.

## Development / Performance

**Helping employees to thrive in self-organisation:** while a lot of employees may immediately thrive within self-organisation, others struggle at first. Challenges are presumed to be rooted in people’s experiences and socialisation (through schools and other workplaces) that hinder autonomy and freedom. Supporting these individuals in practicing decision-making and open communication is considered a task the organisation has to fulfil. This

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lassen von einer Führungsperson, die fachlich vielleicht nicht mehr Ahnung hat [...]. Und sehr gut erklären im ganzen Rekrutierungsprozess, was das heisst. Und dort filtern wir exakt schon wahnsinnig stark.

<sup>83</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Am wichtigsten ist immer, dass man ins Team passt. Dass man die Fähigkeiten mitbringt, die das Team braucht.*

<sup>84</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Recruiting machen die Teams. Mit dem Support, mit dem fachlichen Knowhow eines HR Spezialisten. [...] Das brauchte aber auch eine Transformationsphase. [...] Also, wir liessen sie so quasi wie ein wenig auflaufen, damit sie merken, was sie brauchen. Und das war keine schlechte Strategie, weil mittlerweile erachten sie die Dienstleistung intern als wertvoll. Und rufen sie ab.*

<sup>85</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Ich frage mich dann, wie viel eine HR Person einem Interview wirklich bringen kann, wenn es nicht als Coaching einer Fachperson ist, die die Person auch technisch beurteilen kann?*



includes the sheer endless possibilities individuals are faced with due to job-crafting, learning how to decide where they can make the most difference.

**Compulsory training:** new employees partake in a few compulsory training modules to kickstart their learning about company culture and practices. These modules cover Scrum / Agile mindset and an introduction to Holacracy.

**Self-driven development:** a whole circle called People Development is dedicated to topics such as fostering feedback culture and enabling self-driven career design. As there are no pre-constructed career paths, individuals have to craft their career. This completely self-driven process can be rather challenging for individuals. Visibility (e.g. of skills and development) is an ongoing challenge, both within the organisation and regarding future employability. The organisation is currently experimenting with job shadowing, mentoring programmes or a skills badge system to address this challenge. Furthermore, all employees are assigned a personal *People Developer*, who acts as a sparring partner for feedback and training topics. People Developers also scout for training needs across the organisation. Currently, most role holders have no previous experience in HR-related topics, which is why investing in these roles is expected to have a multiplier effect.

**Learning is omnipresent:** as a general principle, employees are responsible for their own growth and for maximising their learning. Learning and training opportunities are extremely versatile and omnipresent, and include internal trainings, self-study, lunch talk or un-conferences. It is considered the company's task to remove impediments around learning opportunities. For example, all employees are allowed to spend on training whatever they deem necessary to fulfil the purpose of their roles.

*"At some point you have to realise: hang on... Potentially being allowed to do everything, because it's possible, is not the same thing as actually doing something because I'm good at it. Or because I like doing it. And because it's useful that I do it. And that's quite a learning curve the whole organisation has to go through. It takes some calibration. It takes some time. But it's definitely worth it..." (Perroulaz / 0:25:03)<sup>86</sup>.*

*"And sometimes that leads to people being overwhelmed. Of course. We don't have to sweettalk that. [...] There are people, in all kinds of roles, who are used to decisions being made for them. Because of their history or education, for*

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<sup>86</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Du musst irgendwann mal merken. Moment, alles potenziell machen können, weil es offen ist und nichts verboten ist, aber auch wirklich machen können, und sinnvoll, weil ich das wirklich gut kann und gerne mache, das ist nicht das Gleiche. Und dort, durch diese Lernkurve muss man auch mit der Organisation zuerst. Aber das reguliert sich. Es braucht einfach Zeit. Aber das lohnt sich...*



*example. [...] And that demands a mindset shift. [...] let's say 90% are able to just switch to that different mindset. And maximum 10%, maybe even less, aren't good at doing that. And this is where you have to stand up as an organisation and say: OK, we don't have to reinvent the whole system for these people, but we have to support them in learning how to navigate it" (Perroulaz / 0:08:43)<sup>87</sup>.*

*"First of all, they're all responsible for themselves and their continuous learning [...] As a company and an employer, we set incentives and remove impediments. So that everyone can learn as much as possible. [...] But it is up to you to make sure that there's enough time for it alongside your usual job" (Perroulaz / 0:36:58)<sup>88</sup>.*

*"A big investment into the role People Developer. Because I feel that most of the current role holders are people who weren't in the management team or in HR previously. Which means they don't bring a lot of people knowledge to the table. [...] The role holders themselves are saying: we need more tools, we need more guidance, we need more trainings, etcetera. We want to focus on teaching them as much as possible, so they can do a great job. Because we feel like that will help of all of us, as a community" (Perroulaz / 0:45:43)<sup>89</sup>.*

## Communication / Feedback

**Emphasis on open communication:** Establishing a strong communication culture is deemed an enabler for the chosen work environment. However, this is reported to be a lengthy process that needs continuous investment, even after an initial transition period.

**Multi-directional feedback and challenging each other:** Employees need to accept that they are constantly being challenged from others, as well as they are expected to give multi-directional feedback themselves. This system of peer reviews and advice-giving replaces management structures.

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<sup>87</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Sondern manchmal auch zu Überforderung und zu Problemen. Natürlich. Das muss man auch nicht beschönigen. [...] Das heisst, es gibt wirklich Menschen, in ganz unterschiedlichen Rollen, die sich gewohnt sind, einfach historisch und ausbildungstechnisch, dass für sie immer irgendwie entschieden wird. [...] Und das erfordert ein gewisses Umdenken. [...] sagen wir jetzt mal 90% die können das einfach, jetzt bei uns. Und vielleicht maximum 10%, wahrscheinlich sind es sogar weniger, die können das nicht gut. Und dann muss man einfach als Unternehmen hinstehen und sagen: OK, für die müssen wir jetzt das nicht neu erfinden, sondern mit denen müssen wir das jetzt üben, dass die das können.*

<sup>88</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Also, A ist jeder für sich selber verantwortlich, sich selber weiterzubilden und möglichst viel zu lernen. [...] Wir bieten Anreize, als Unternehmen, als Arbeitgeber. Damit es möglichst wenig Hürden gibt. Und möglichst wenig Restriktionen. Damit du möglichst viel machen kannst. [...] Aber du musst dich halt dafür einsetzen, dass es halt auch drin liegt, neben deinem Job.*

<sup>89</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und dann ganz ein grosses Investment in die Rolle People Developer. Weil ich das Gefühl habe, dort sind momentan mehrheitlich Leute drin, die vorher nicht in der Geschäftsleitung und nicht im HR waren. Sprich, die eigentlich von dem Thema verhältnismässig wenig Ahnung haben. [...] es kommt auch von diesen Rolleninhaber selber, dass sie wirklich das Gefühl haben: Wir brauchen mehr Tools, wir brauchen mehr Guidance, wir brauchen mehr Trainings, etcetera. Also, dass wir dort wirklich den Fokus darauf legen, denen möglichst viel beizubringen, damit die das möglichst gut machen können. Weil wir auch das Gefühl haben, dass die uns weiterbringen werden, als Gemeinschaft Liip uns weiterzuentwickeln.*

**Creating a dynamic system:** Holacracy has been established as a framework for self-organisation in 2016, in order to build an organisation that is agile, innovative and at the same time socially and ecologically responsible. Its flexibility allows the structure to be as close as possible to how the actual work is done, at any point in time. The organisation is described as a dynamic system that will always be in transformation. Essentially, its structure reflects the work that has to be done, which is delivered with a role-based approach.

**Constant re-evaluation of internal services:** internal services (including HR) are re-designed according to current needs on a regular basis. As a rule of thumb, the organisation strives to only deliver in-house where there is a clearly visible value added.

**Circle Personal Administration:** the circle Personal Administration lies in the General Company Circle (i.e. outer company boundaries). It contains several sub-circles and serves the purpose of accompanying potential and current employees during their whole life cycle, whilst fulfilling legal obligations as an employer. So-called *legislative* (i.e. more strategic) roles are not involved in everyday operations and for example define the components of the employment contracts. *Operative* roles in this circle cover for example employer branding, emergencies, labour contracts, employee statistics, HR Administrator tasks, HR Specialist tasks. The role of HR Specialist is multi-staffed with five people (with a branch focus).

**Circle People Development:** the circle People Development is dedicated to employee development, pathways and feedback. Currently it also includes the Onboarding circle, which is likely to move to the circle Personal Administration instead. Every employee has a dedicated People Developer who is also responsible for feedback and reviews.

*“Holacracy really serves us, because it essentially does what we want. [...] Which is making sure that we have a flexible organisation. Where people can do what they like doing, and what they are good at, and where they can truly participate and change things. And where we can live up to a culture that’s social and ecological. And at the same time agile, efficient and innovative” (Perroulaz / 0: 06:38)<sup>90</sup>.*

<sup>90</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und Holacracy bietet das relativ gut, weil Holacracy macht eigentlich genau das, was wir wollen. [...] Nämlich, dass wir dafür sorgen, dass wir eine Organisation haben, die flexibel ist. Wo sich die Leute mit dem, was sie gerne machen, und gut können, einbringen können und sich auch verändern können. In dem wir für eine Kultur sorgen, die eben die Aspekte hat: Sozial, ökologisch. Aber gleich auch agil, speditiv, innovativ.*

*“And we’re still in a transformational phase. And I think that’s never really going to change, because of the dynamic system we’re in. Whereas in other companies you have one reorganisation after the other. And maybe we just have a more accurate approach, a more timely approach. Which might appear a bit more chaotic. But at the end of the day it’s probably closer to how the work actually gets done” (Lorenzi / 0:01:26)<sup>91</sup>.*

*“Your own development is really a blank canvas. I think this is often underestimated. [...] I don’t have a job anymore if this task is taken away from me. What will I do then? [...] It’s so much more dynamic now. And if you’re doing a good job and if you’re engaged, then you get so many inquiries about potential projects that you really have to learn how to say no. [...] But on the flipside, you also see all your different options that you don’t have time for. As a result, you try to get rid of everything tedious...” (Lorenzi / 0:24:32)<sup>92</sup>.*

### Self-concept of HR / People management

**Evolving from compliance-based HR:** in its traditional sense, HR Specialists are perceived to be far removed from individual employees, merely coaching line management. In self-organisation, this is fundamentally different. As there are no managers, HR Specialists are described to be equally accountable to all employees. The organisation’s self-concept of HR also comes from the realisation that HR practices have to evolve in order to adjust to the new way of working. At its core, nowadays, is the maxim of adding value, passing on knowledge and foster skills development instead of controlling. Compliance is reduced to fulfilling basic legal duties. As long as you live up to these principles, the organisation is convinced that it does not matter what you call it (e.g. Human Resources, People Operations, etcetera).

The future viability of HR with a pure administrative focus is questioned in the wake of digitalisation, as well as its capability to control and enforce policies in the first place. This shift is reflected in the headcount, with a reduced number of HR Administrator roles and a recent up-staffing with HR Specialists. HR roles (and their grouping in circles) are still regularly updated, according to current needs. Role-holders are also expected to constantly question the value added of their own tasks.

<sup>91</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und wir sind immer noch so in einer Transformationsphase. Also, ich glaube, durch die Dynamik des Systems ist das eigentlich nie abgeschlossen, jetzt. Was ja eigentlich auch in anderen Firmen so ist, dort hast du einfach Reorg um Reorg um Reorg. Und wir machen es halt einfach so ein bisschen klarer, also zeitgenauer vielleicht. Dadurch wirkt es etwas chaotischer, aber am Schluss ist wahrscheinlich eher so, wie wirklich gearbeitet wird.*

<sup>92</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Weisst du, das ist bei uns eine grüne Wiese. Wo du dich hin entwickeln willst. Und, ja, ich denke, das wird häufig unterschätzt. [...] Wenn mir das weggenommen wird, dann habe ich keinen Job mehr. Was mache ich dann? [...] Genau, und bei uns ist es so dynamisch. Und wenn du einen guten Job machst und engagiert bist. Dann bekommst du so viele Anfragen für mögliche Projekte, dass du lernen musst Nein zu sagen. [...] Aber dadurch siehst du halt auch alle Optionen. Für die du keine Zeit hast. Also, versuchst du alles Mühsame so schnell wie möglich loszuwerden...*

**Emancipation of HR roles:** People filling HR-related roles should be approachable, direct and supportive, with a focus on developing pragmatic solutions instead of building control mechanisms. They are urged to see themselves as internal service provider, hence striving to support the organisation and its members where they are needed most. In short: Generating services to make people's lives easier, constantly adjusting these services to the reality of the organisation. All roles in the circle People Development are currently filled by people with no previous HR expertise, which further speaks for a more distributed approach to HR.

**HR as coaches and experts:** in the early days of the transformation, the organisation questioned the need for HR Specialists as such. As an initial experiment, all HR support was withdrawn, e.g. letting teams do all recruiting themselves, which quickly led to the realisation that they lacked the skills to do it completely independently. As a result, HR services nowadays are deemed valuable and in demand. HR now has a multiplier effect across the organisation, as long it understands itself as a coaching entity that spreads skills and knowledge and acts as a sparring partner.

*"Well, usually in HR you coach line management. And maybe the HR Administrators, a little. And that's completely different here. We always have to explain this to new HR Specialists, or former Business Partners: hey, that's different here! [...] There is no line management. Which means that you serve all 180 people equally. And that it's your job to generate internal services and adjust them to our reality. To allow everyone to profit from it. [...] About two years ago I was debating what was going to happen and whether HR was still needed at all. [...] Meanwhile we realised that there's still a strong need. Not in the traditional sense, but these skills are still needed. You just have to organise it differently within the company and set up the people differently. But the need is there" (Perroulaz / 0:19:52)<sup>93</sup>.*

*"I think it's important to realise that HR doesn't work the same way anymore... And that automation and digitalisation are huge topics in this field. [...] And this entails a constant questioning yourself: are we still needed? Where are we needed? And where are we no longer needed? [...] And I really try to instil these thoughts whenever I'm speaking at an event with lots of HR professionals. That they start thinking about: hey, what are we doing here*

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<sup>93</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Also, du coachst eigentlich die Linie im HR Geschäft. Und vielleicht noch ein wenig die HR Administratoren. Und das ist natürlich vollkommen anders hier. Wenn du hierher kommst, dann müssen wir zuerst immer diesen HR Spezialisten, oder ehemaligen Business Partner, erklären: Hey, that's different here! [...] Es gibt keine Linie. Das heisst, du bist genau gleich engagiert für alle 180. Und dein Job ist es, Services zu generieren, hier innerhalb, und diese anzupassen an die Realität, die wir hier haben. Damit alle davon profitieren können. [...] Vor zwei Jahren war ich auch noch an einem Punkt, an dem ich fand: Mal schauen, was jetzt passiert, vielleicht braucht es das gar nicht mehr. [...] Und mittlerweile merken wir, das braucht es total. Nicht mehr klassisch, aber die Kompetenzen, die diese Leute mitbringen, die braucht es. Du musst es einfach anders organisieren im Unternehmen und diese Leute anders aufsetzen. Aber die sind gefragt.*

*exactly? Because it's absolutely pointless to have internal services whose job it is to simply make other people's lives difficult" (Perroulaz / 0:47:41)<sup>94</sup>.*

*"And we also have to educate companies [...] to not be tempted to introduce a new rule for every mistake or misuse made, so to speak, as Holacracy can be quite a restricting framework. That would be extremely dangerous. [...] You'll always have isolated incidents, no matter what framework you're using" (Perroulaz / 0:48:22)<sup>95</sup>.*

*"My current approach is: look, I'm here with all my expertise. Especially in recruiting, which I've done for about ten years now. So, come and ask me if you need help. And if you think you can do it alone, then go for it. However, if we kind of have to let three people go during their employment trial period, I'll start asking some questions. And I'll say: OK, maybe we have to look at it and see how we can do things differently" (Lorenzi / 0:11:43)<sup>96</sup>.*

*"Especially with internal services, your constant motivation has to be to make yourself obsolete. I mean, you're never going to succeed in that. [...] I notice that... [...] HR, but also finances, all these administrative things, we try to automate and outsource as much as possible. If it makes sense. Before, people were much more inclined to defend their turf. But now they see the vast potential of what else they could be doing" (Lorenzi / 0:23:31)<sup>97</sup>.*

## Decision-making capacity

**Self-organisation fosters responsibility:** Self-organisation allows individuals to move freely within the organisation and set their own priorities, serving the purpose of their roles and circles. Thus, it is not hierarchy-free: individuals generally take on a lot of responsibility and have to make decisions within their roles (while they are not allowed to make decisions for others). A system

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<sup>94</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Eben, was, glaube ich, wichtig ist, ist wirklich dieses Erkennen, und zwar, dass HR nicht mehr gleich funktioniert... Und dort ist es halt einfach die Automatisierung und Digitalisierung ein Riesenthema. [...] Und auch, immer wieder dich hinterfragen: Braucht es uns noch? Wo braucht es uns? Für was braucht es uns nicht mehr? [...] Und das versuche ich jetzt auch anzuregen, wenn ich auswärts an Events auftrete, an denen es viele HR Leute hat. Dass man einfach so ein bisschen überlegt: Hey, was machen wir eigentlich hier genau? Es macht keinen Sinn, dass du irgendwie intern Stellen hast, die einfach irgendwie den Menschen nur das Leben schwer machen.*

<sup>95</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und auch Unternehmen [...] dazu erziehen, dass wir nicht auf die, das ist relativ ein starkes Regelwerk, dieses Holacracy, dass wir nicht auf die Schiene kommen, für jeden Missbrauch, in Führungszeichen, oder Fehltritt von jemandem, eine Regel schaffen zu müssen. Das ist extrem gefährlich. [...] Einfach: Einzelfälle hast du immer. Egal, was du für ein Regelwerk hast.*

<sup>96</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ich bin ein bisschen auf der Schiene: Ja, schau, ich bin da mit meinem Fachwissen. Gerade Rekrutierung, das habe ich jetzt irgendwie zehn Jahre gemacht. Kommt mich fragen, wenn ihr Hilfe braucht. Wenn ihr findet, ihr könnt es alleine, dann macht mal. Wenn wir dann irgendwie drei Leute in der Probezeit entlassen müssen, dann komme ich dann schon mal nachfragen. Und sage: OK, jetzt müssen wir das wahrscheinlich mal anschauen, dass wir das anders machen.*

<sup>97</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Gerade so bei internen Stellen, eigentlich muss dein konstanter Antreiber sein, deinen Job überflüssig zu machen. Ich meine, du wirst nie fertig. [...] Also, ich merke auch ganz viel [...] Beim Personal, aber auch bei Finanzen, und bei all diesen administrativen Dingen, man versucht, so viel wie möglich plötzlich zu automatisieren und outsourcen. Wenn es Sinn macht. Und vorher hat man mehr so versucht, ein wenig sein Gärtchen zu verteidigen. Weil man plötzlich das Potenzial sieht, was man auch noch machen könnte.*

of advice-giving acts as scaffolding in the process. In this environment, the entrepreneurial thinking is paramount for everyone.

**Removing bottlenecks for decision-making:** Self-organisation unburdens former leaders from having to be present and making decisions all the time. Instead, all role-holders are expected to make decisions in their own realm of autonomy. The structure is aimed at enabling people to make decisions that are probably most knowledgeable in the subject-matter. This also includes decision-making around their own training and learning, as top-down planning would contradict the maxim of self-organisation.

**Challenges of shared responsibility:** Empowering people to make decisions can be a rather lengthy process at first, which can be enormously challenging for former leaders who are used to troubleshooting. The vast possibilities and responsibilities can be daunting and stressful for individuals who are new to such an environment. It can be quite a learning process for individuals to find out what they are good at and where they add the most value.

*“To empower others to make their own decisions. To just give advice. At the very beginning, it was incredibly exhausting, because you always fall back into this pattern of wanting to help. To act as a trouble shooter and decision-maker” (Perroulaz / 0:10:02)<sup>98</sup>.*

*“In which role are you asking me? What do you want to know from me? And then, if I answer, I stress again: this is advice, it’s not a decision. You decide” (Perroulaz / 0:10:41)<sup>99</sup>.*

*“I think it’s an advantage of our system that the people making the decisions are more likely to have the expertise. On the other hand, you invest more in making mistakes, because there are more people who can make wrong decisions. [...] But we mitigate this risk by coaching and the fact that you can ask for advice all the time” (Lorenzi / 0:08:20)<sup>100</sup>.*

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<sup>98</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Andere darin zu befähigen, selber zu entscheiden. Und einfach Advice zu geben. Ganz zu Beginn, in der ersten Zeit, da ist es wahnsinnig anstrengend, weil man immer wieder in dieses Muster zurückfällt, jemandem helfen zu wollen. Als Troubleshooter einzuspringen. Als Entscheider einzuspringen.*

<sup>99</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *In welcher Rolle fragst du mich das? Und was möchtest du gerne von mir wissen? Und dann, wenn ich antworte, dann noch einmal sage: Das ist ein Rat, das ist nicht ein Entscheid. Du entscheidest.*

<sup>100</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und ich denke, da hat unser System den Vorteil, dass Leute entscheiden, die wahrscheinlich, ich sage jetzt mal, wahrscheinlich eher, eine Ahnung von der Materie haben wie Andere. Auf der anderen Seite hast du es halt, dass du halt entweder mehr investierst in Fehler, dass die Leute auch Fehler machen können, weil halt mehr Leute falsch entscheiden können. [...] Aber ich denke dadurch, dass man auch Coachings und so zur Verfügung stellt und man überall, immer Advice holen kann, ist das wie auch ein bisschen aufgefangen.*



#### 4.7. Redvespa

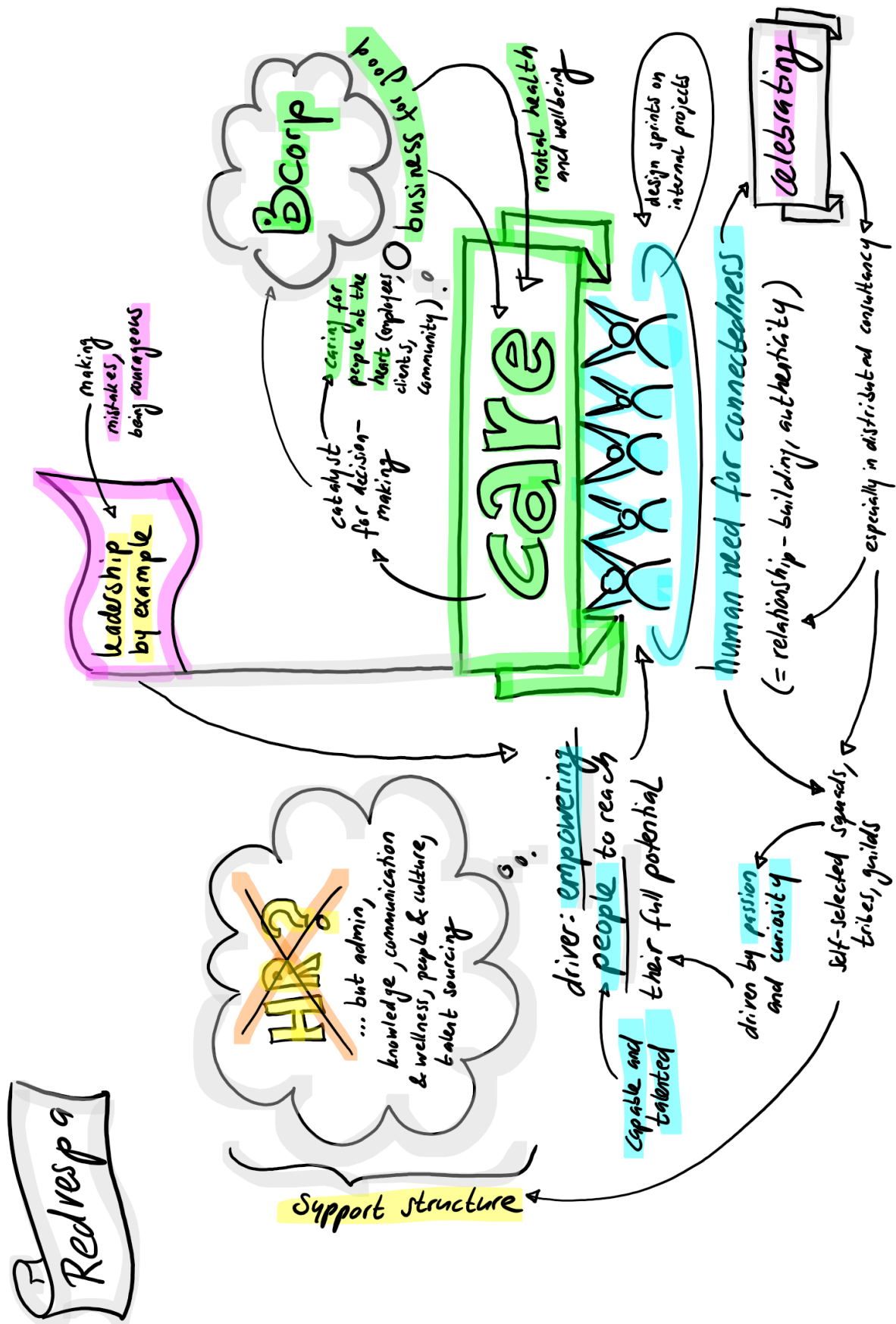


Figure 19 Concept map: Redvespa  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Need for connectedness:** the organisation is convinced that being part of a community contributes to wellbeing – especially for remote workers. This includes having trusting and authentic relationships in the workplace. As a consequence, the organisation invests in relationship-building and support structures, to increase employee wellbeing and strengthen the culture.

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Care as the foundation of the business:** when collecting stories about the culture of the organisation in a recent discovery, the word *care* was used most frequently by both employees and clients. It represents the core value or brand essence: caring for people with the heart and caring for business with the mind. The four values around that are: *Vitality, integrity, realism* and *A-players*. The company is also B Corp certified, a label for sustainability.

**Values as a catalyst for decision-making:** Employees are not expected to be able to repeat the company values by heart, as living by them is deemed much more important. Values are also being used as a test in decision-making, for example during board meetings: does that help us to live up to our values?

**Empowering people as a purpose:** when it was founded, the main driver was to create a business that cares for people, empowers them to find their passions and unleash their potential. This overarching purpose extends beyond employees and includes clients and the wider community. People are expected to bring their whole, authentic selves to work, which also explains the company's investment in mental health and wellbeing.

*"One of the things that came back was, the word that everybody used all the time was 'care'. [...] And so, we say we care for people with the heart and we care for the business with the mind. And that means that at times we care enough to make the tough calls, if we have to. So, that is at the heart of Redvespa. And then sitting around that are the values of vitality, integrity, realism and A-players" (Gibson / 0:02:51).*

*"I would like to think, that if you were to meet with anybody from Redvespa and said to them: what are the values of the organisation? They would talk about 'care'. They would all say 'care'. And then they'd say, probably, around realism, they might say, practical, down-to-earth. What you see is what you get. They're just normal people. There's no hierarchy in the organisation or*



*anything like that. So, they would probably articulate who we are. They might not necessarily be able to say the name of the value..." (Gibson / 0:04:43).*

*"We make decisions based on our values. We would often sit in a meeting. Even a board meeting. And if there's a tough decision to be made, someone will say: hang on a minute, let's just run this past our values. [...] And we'll use that as a test. [...] They are intrinsic to who we are as an organisation, without them actually being specifically talked about, or written" (Gibson / 0:05:28).*

*"It has been a real driver for me. That every person deserves care and the opportunity to find what they're really great at and fly. [...] When we started Redvespa, we said regardless of what we actually do, our purpose is to unleash potential in people and enrich their lives, the lives of the businesses we work with and the wider community. That's our core purpose. That's why we exist. That's the motivation for everything that we do" (Gibson / 0:43:55).*

### **Image of the human person**

**People are capable and talented:** Employees are seen as capable, talented and passionate individuals, who want to collaborate and do their best. They are also seen as whole people and expected to be authentic.

*"I guess what we're trying to do is help people to understand that the biggest thing is: be yourself at Redvespa. [...] There's no pretension" (Gibson / 0:35:16).*

### **Definition of leadership**

**Holistic view on leadership:** CEO explains that the way the organisation functions, and the way she leads, is founded on her being a mum, where she learned about being an authentic self and raising others.

*"My background is being a mum. My career path to being the director [...] is from having nine years at home with two boys full-time. That's where I learned care and influencing and negotiation, building trust and communication and connection and relationships and collaboration, all those things. And being an authentic self. [...] That's how Redvespa functions" (Gibson / 0:19:47).*

## Learning organisation

**Error culture:** Employees are encouraged to step out of their comfort zone and be courageous. Making mistakes is deemed a natural component of an organisation with very high-performing peers.

**Commitment investing in culture:** especially in a growing organisation, it is deemed important to continuously invest in the culture. Resting on your laurels is not an option, because change has to be a constant. Employees run design sprints and engage in delivering the strategy around improving support structures between client work – to actively drive the organisation forward.

*“And trying to lead with doing courageous things ourselves. Putting ourselves out of our comfort zone. To show people that it's OK. And that if it doesn't work, that's OK. You can fail and that's OK. [...] Be brave. Be courageous. What's the worst thing that can happen? You hit a bad note. But it doesn't matter. You just carry on. This one of the biggest challenges with our people. Because they're so high-performing. And it's really hard. It can be really hard to join an organisation where everybody is high-performing” (Gibson / 0:51:13).*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Personal experience around connectedness:** Care and equal opportunity are a strong driver for the CEO. This motivation is founded in personal experiences with racism and pre-emptive judgment. To create an organisation with strong caring aspects has therefore been a major driver.

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

*No data*

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

**HR admin role:** there is a role responsible for HR administration.

### Salary / Finances

*No data*

## Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Language essential for employer branding:** the language used on the website or job advertisements is carefully chosen to convey the culture of the organisation, with the aim of attracting candidates who could be a cultural fit.

**Checking for cultural fit:** after having sent in their application, the recruitment process starts with an informal coffee chat between the candidate and a Talent Sourcing Advisor. If successful, the second interview is led by a Sales Advisor (who can check for potential clients) and a People and Culture Advisor (who can check for the cultural fit). Candidates also meet a couple of consultants during the process to ensure team fit and give the candidate the opportunity to ask questions about their way of working.

**Way of working as a criterion:** a main criterion for candidates is their suitability for the autonomous way of working, where have to operate under uncertainty and flexibility.

*"I think that, because of who we are and the way we talk... Like, if you go to our website or if you read, for example, job ad[vertisement]s... They feel different. So, only people who get it apply, in the first place. So, there is a bit of a uniqueness to the language we use and the way we talk about ourselves and talk about who we want to come here and work with us" (Gibson / 0:20:43).*

*"Does it feel like this person could fit in the organisation? And how can we, in return, support them? Because for us, it's as much about them interviewing us as we are interviewing them" (Gibson / 0:21:40).*

## On- / Offboarding

**Induction days:** the onboarding process is considered vital and worth dedicating time to, and hence is structured carefully. The company compares it to rolling out the red carpet. Before their first day of work, new employees receive an email from the CEO, thanking them for choosing the organisation and giving them an outline for their onboarding period. At the very start, employees spend three days at the headquarter, to help them set up for their journey from an organisational as well as cultural perspective. For example, new employees receive a booklet containing values and stories, and have a chat with the CEO to convey those values. New employees are also encouraged to be authentic from the start.

**Onboarding mentors:** new employees are allocated a (usually slightly more senior) onboarding mentor to help them navigate through everyday processes, whom they meet for regular catch-ups during the first six months.

*"In the induction, we try and help people to understand that it's OK to be yourself. I suppose that's a big part of the induction" (Gibson / 0:35:43).*

*"It was quite unique in terms of, just that thing of actually taking the time out, to do a proper induction, like, I've never had a proper induction... At any place I've worked" (Luckmann / 0:28:05).*

*"I think you get to actually know the organisation properly. You get to know all the managers. And I guess you get to hear it from them. I guess, non-diluted. [...] As much as you can read it in a vision statement. It doesn't mean a lot, until you actually hear someone talk about it" (Luckmann / 0:28:40).*

## Development / Performance

**No annual performance reviews:** mid- and post-assignment reviews replace annual performance reviews and include feedback from the client. The goal is to link feedback as close to practice as possible and always look at both areas of improvement and reasons to celebrate. The only annual event is a conversation between consultant and HR as an outlook on the following year.

**Self-driven development:** Passion and curiosity act as a driver for professional development. The organisation has a holistic view on what it calls *capability development*, which includes everything from wellbeing to functional training. There is a loose and rather generous yearly L&D (Learning & Development) budget per person. Employees sit together with their People and Culture Advisor to decide how that budget should be spent. There are few in-house training sessions, for example about storytelling, future tech or Agile.

**Knowledge Officer:** the role of Knowledge Officer puts systems and processes in place to ensure employees are able to share and re-use knowledge. The role is also involved in scanning the consultants' weekly progress reports to see if additional support is needed on a project.

**Transparent capabilities:** individual capabilities are recorded on the intranet and are accessible to all employees.

**Consulting career:** recently, the role of Business Solution Consultant has been introduced as a career path for senior consultants.

*“So there's a real commitment to capability development. And it can be anything. [...] It depends upon the individual person, as to where is the right area. We will have conversations with them, sort of saying: This is what we're seeing. And we think that this year it's better to develop you in your wellbeing space than it is to spend money on something functionally related. But next year we might look at something functional. So, it's the whole person rather than purely functional capability development” (Gibson / 0:27:01).*

## Communication / Feedback

**Ongoing feedback:** as direct feedback is believed to have the most impact, the company focuses on fostering continuous feedback throughout the year, which includes client feedback.

**Squads as support networks:** Consultants meet semi-regularly in (self-selected) squads, which also act as a support network.

*“It's a self-selection process to come up with who's going to be in the tribes. And then you have semi-regular tribe meetings with that tribe. We'll basically just get together to chew the fat. [...] But then you can also call on those people. You can call on everyone else. But I guess it gives you a clear place to go to, rather than just trying to fire out into the ether. To go: who can help me with this” (Luckmann / 0:15:10)?*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Flat hierarchy and role-based:** the organisation has a reporting structure, yet emphasises its flat hierarchy. Its approach is role-based, which includes pre-recorded descriptions of purpose, responsibilities and relationships as a one-pager per role. However, descriptions are developed fluidly over time, depending on a role holder's passions and curiosities.

**Self-selected tribes and squads:** all consultants work in self-selected squads which act as a support structure. The core organisation has squads for culture, technology, R&D, communications and branding, and administration. Squads operate largely autonomous and feed into the overall strategy. Every year they write a business case for funding and discuss it with the CEO.

**Guilds:** Guilds act as communities of interest on work-related and non-work-related topics. They can be easily (dis-)established and are open for all employees to join.

*“Because for us, a lot of wellness comes from communication and connectedness. [...] There's a lot of research that shows that one of the biggest things this leads to difficulties with mental wellbeing is lack of community and network and connectedness and relationships (Gibson / 0:13:25). And I guess that's probably the hard thing about building a culture and a consultancy, is that most people are never back in the home office. [...] So, they've really had to think about: how do you actually build culture with remote workers, essentially. [...] The guilds and tribes and things like that, so that people have places to come together as Redvespa and communicate as Redvespa and give the support” (Luckmann / 0:06:09).*

### **Self-concept of HR / People management**

**Strong relationships:** Knowing your people intimately, helping them unleash their potential and celebrating them are seen as cornerstones of the family-feel that is so important to the organisation.

**Culture officer:** this role is responsible for the framework that helps translating values into action (e.g. tribes, guilds, recruitment process). With a growing organisation, this role is multi-staffed with a regional focus.

**Head of Communications and Wellness:** the current Head of Communications and Wellness brings his storytelling experience to the role. Combining the topics of communication and wellbeing was intentional, as it ties into the perception of mental health as feeling connected and having meaningful relationships. It also reflects the strong people-centric culture.

**Talent Sourcing Advisor:** The Talent Sourcing Advisor role engages in first informal coffee chats with potential recruiting candidates to test potential fit.

**People and Culture Advisors:** People and Culture Advisors are responsible for providing direct care, capability development and ensure an overall great employee experience. Their relationship with employees is enabled by having close and honest relationships with people and knowing what goes on in their lives beyond work – outside of a reporting structure. Each People and Culture Advisor looks after roughly 30 employees, with a regional focus as well. The current role holders come from very diverse background, from traditional HR to HR consultancy and research.

*“I call them moments of love. You know, if there's something really amazing going on for one of our people then we'll celebrate that with them. [...] It*

*sounds really tried, but it really is like a family. Everybody knows each other pretty intimately, really well” (0:18:47).*

### **Decision-making capacity**

**Autonomous consultants and squads:** individual consultants and squads (i.e. teams) operate largely independent, while feeding into the strategic programme with their work. Squads inform the CEO and write a brief business case annually if they need funding, which will be then looked at together.

#### 4.8. Snapper

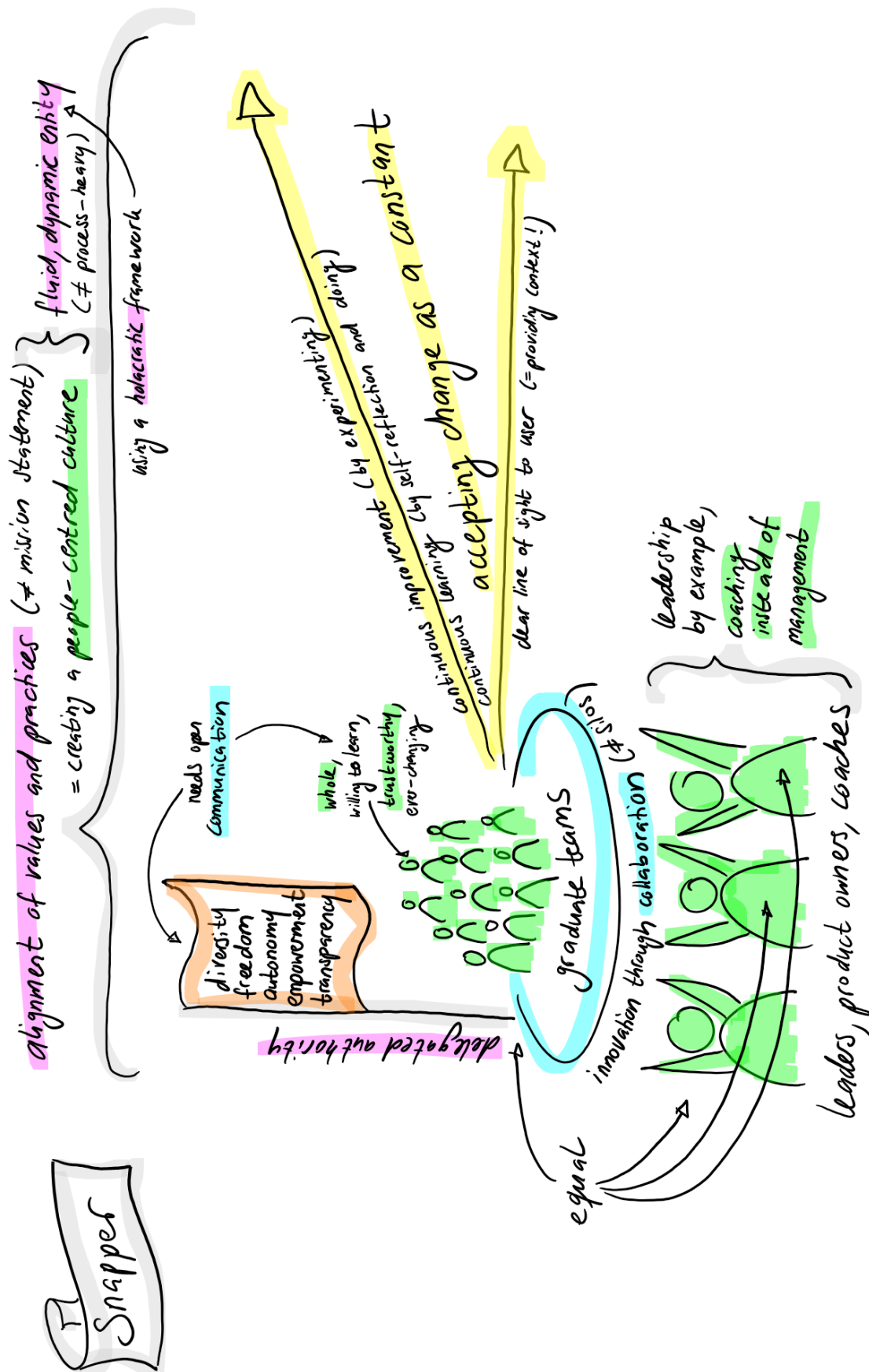


Figure 20 Concept map: Snapper  
Own figure



## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Building good relationships:** Building strong, personal relationships is seen as a cornerstone of successful collaboration. In this environment, autonomy does not equal isolation, but merely means individuals are empowered to make their own decisions around how they want to achieve a certain result.

**Fostering collaboration and networking:** fluid team structures are aimed at fostering collaboration and avoiding the creation of silos. Furthermore, it ensures an individual's skills are applied where they add the most value. Working across different teams exposes individuals to different perspectives. Collaboration is viewed as the key to fostering innovation. For capability and capacity reasons, the organisation frequently collaborates with partners.

*"Autonomy and isolation, they are two different things. We collaborate a lot. And we give a lot of visibility around what we try to achieve. [...] And you are trusted to achieve that, because that's the realm you've been given" (Roques b / 0:05:41).*

*"We value innovation very highly, but we know that innovation is a team sport. It's not something that an individual can do" (Szikszai / 0:05:39).*

*"Fluid teams allow us to apply the right skills at the right time to a job to be done. It also means people are not getting pigeonholed" (Szikszai / 0:30:38).*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Alignment of values and practices:** Practices need to be aligned with values. Similarly, methodologies and tools are always tailored to the organisation's current needs and not implemented in a rulebook approach.

**No mission statement:** the company prefers to see values exhibited in everyday behaviour rather than simply record them in a written statement.

**Shared understanding of purpose:** the organisation seeks to create a shared understanding on three levels. Why am I here? Why is my team here? Why is the company here? Having this kind of context is believed to avoid fragmentation. Accordingly, all employees are expected to have an understanding of their own contribution towards the customers' goals. This leads to a second set of questions that fosters alignment with the organisation's purpose: can individuals apply their skills? Are individuals

applying their skills in the company's interest? And is that helping the end customers to do whatever they are trying to do?

**People-oriented culture:** the organisation thrives to establish a work environment where people collaborate naturally and communicate openly. People are viewed as more than the sum of their skills, which demands a holistic view: what do they bring to the organisation? Successful collaboration is traced back to individuals being authentic and vulnerable.

**Empowerment and autonomy:** every role has its own realm of autonomy, where individuals are empowered and trusted to make their own decisions. At the same time, clear visibility of goals and progress prevent isolation. A process-heavy, bureaucratic organisation is seen as a threat to the freedom and autonomy that individuals need to do their job. The company also believes that people want to control their own destiny and have an impact on the environment they are working in while growing their own skills.

**Transparency:** Transparency is a prerequisite to delegated authority.

**Diversity:** a diversity of skills, perspectives and backgrounds is deemed essential to create a great team, as solving complex problems requires different approaches.

*"It's very much a people-oriented culture. We succeed in doing what we're doing because we work well together. And I think that's very much what you feel on a day-to-day basis. Everyone is very friendly. Everyone is very understanding, listening to each other. And that makes it a good environment to work in, really. Because once you've established that collaboration and good, interpersonal communication and trust, then you move on to what has to be done, really" (Roques a / 0:22:15).*

*"We use a triangle... [...] People have skills. And we think about whether they can apply those skills. [...] But actually, that's not enough. [...] Are they applying those skills in terms of what matters to Snapper? But that's still not enough. We have to think about the customer [...]. What's their context? The stuff that matters the most is: what's the job that that person is trying to get done? [...] So, for everyone in the organisation, we're trying to say: OK, how do we help you understand what's happening up here? So you can do your best job down here. [...] And what we sometimes find is, as you go through that, is that some people can actually quite easily move out of that and others can't. So, they need help and support" (Szikszai / 0:03:32).*

*“But context is a constant challenge. It's a constant challenge in a fast-paced environment as well. If you want to delegate good decisions, then you have to know that you are delegating it to a team of people who have that understanding. Or they're just operating at a completely different level. If I'm operating at the skills level and you tell me to do something, I'm going to make a decision based purely on what the fastest way to code is. Or the most elegant way of coding that problem is... I'm going to have no comprehension of why you're asking me to do it, let alone who the person is that's using it. Let alone what job they're trying to do” (Comerford / 0:31:01).*

*“You can't have genuine delegation without true, honest transparency. And true, honest transparency requires a fearless culture. [...] there's so many dimensions to this process. Mastery, obviously. I mean, everybody wants to improve and grow. And autonomy. I've not met anyone yet who doesn't want to be in control of their own destiny. And then [...] that broader holistic view of the environment that you're working with. And how you can control it. And how you can improve it” (Comerford / 0:32:14).*

### **Image of the human person**

**People are trustworthy:** the baseline of trust stems from the fundamental belief that people are good and have good intentions. If that baseline is established, it comes to an assessment of individual skills to fill a certain role.

**People are able to learn and change:** the company views people as whole, which means they have a functional as well as an emotional perspective on life and what they want to achieve. As such, it acknowledges that people change, both positively and negatively. This leads to soft skills, such as the ability to collaborate, learn and show empathy, becoming increasingly important. And it also implies that people cannot be hired to fill a static skills gap, as they are inevitably dynamic and nuanced.

*“That realm of autonomy is what gives you empowerment and motivation to do what you have to do. You are trusted to have the skills. And we give you support to do what you have to do. How you do it is up to you” (Roques b / 0:01:55).*

*“It's not black and white. It's a very nuanced, changing, dynamic thing. And it's not static. We have to allow for the fact that people will change [...]. You have to allow for the fact that their context is not just work. [...] So, there's a very wide view that we take on those people. And probably the most important things we think about now, in terms of skills, [...] is what we call core skills, and*

*they align very much with those values. We are looking for people who can demonstrate that they can collaborate. [...] That they can problem solve. That they can have empathy [...]. So, it's much more of a continual process-oriented view of the world. Rather than: here's someone at a state and we need this particular skill set in this state and we're going to plug them in. [...] That doesn't work for us. We have to have the whole person" (Szikszai / 0:07:57).*

*"I think, in a professional context, people seek [...] mastery. They seek autonomy. [...] And I think that I trust always by default, implicitly, that all people are good, that all people have good intention. But when we look in a professional environment, where we're looking to achieve a common goal, then knowing that everybody in your team has good intentions is great. And that's a hygiene aspect, that just needs to be there. [...] So, if we presume that all teams operate with the implicit expectation that everybody has good intentions, then trust comes down to an effective assessment of their attitudes and their skills. [...] Trust is an interesting one. At the most fundamental level of: are people good? It must be there" (Comerford / 0:13:11).*

#### **Definition of leadership**

**Coaches instead of managers:** Coaches are on eye-level with development teams. It is their job to influence and empower the development team members without having any kind of line management power or control over them. They legitimise themselves by collaborating on a day-to-day basis, building close relationships. The organisation strives to remove hierarchy bias (e.g. valuing the CTO's opinion over someone else's) by being present and approachable, providing context and explaining intent for any suggestion.

**Leadership by example:** for the senior leadership team, leading by example means exhibiting the same behaviour they want to foster across the organisation. For instance, it distances itself from the idea of heroic leadership by being vulnerable and service-oriented, which includes avoiding micro-management that would undermine trust.

**Measuring leadership by impact:** instead of measuring leadership by direct outcomes, the organisation believes that good leadership is visible through indirect impact, e.g. what leaders can get others to achieve instead of what they do themselves.

*"And Snapper has a slightly different approach, where we have a group of coaches. [...] and our job is to sit on the sides, by the team, not over the team,*

*and to give them all the knowledge and the tools and the techniques that they need to do whatever they have to do” (Roques a / 0:01:18).*

*“So, it's very much influencing and empowering the teams without having any control and power over them” (Roques a / 0:03:39).*

*“I think as individuals, you've got to be vulnerable. [...] for me, it's a lot around recognising that there is no such thing as heroic leadership. [...] It's very much service-oriented. [...] I mean, my role in the organisation is to make sure that we're meeting our overarching purpose and to continue to test that that purpose is the appropriate one for the company. I don't need to get involved in how people are doing their jobs. And I shouldn't. Because that starts to generate distrust and it doesn't actually give people the space that they need to grow” (Szikszai / 0:17:31).*

*“The key thing that we said to the coaches is: your impact is not measured by what you do. It's what you can get others to do” (Szikszai / 0:26:44).*

*“I was working in this utopia of: everybody treats me as a peer. [...] And there's two things that I needed to do to address it. One was: I needed to spend more time with every one of them, to break down this barrier, to break down the sense of: when Norm comes, it's serious. Actually, when Norm comes, it's normal, he's just like everybody else. [...] the other one was, to make sure that I communicated the intent or context that I had around any suggestion that I was making. So that it wasn't the suggestion on its own” (Comerford / 1:08:56).*

## **Learning organisation**

**Organisation as a living organism:** the organisation is compared to an organ, and hence a dynamic and ever-changing entity. Accepting and embracing uncertainty is described as a must when operating in a highly complex environment. Practices such as regular reshuffling of teams should help to accept change as a constant. This includes having to be comfortable with having a clear goal, yet only knowing what the next step (or two) looks like – and being comfortable with stopping and changing direction if the chosen steps do not seem to be helpful.

How the company operates hence depends much more on the interaction, the values and purpose than the structure. To avoid mistakes by presuming too much knowledge, decision-makers adopt a mindset they call being *unconsciously incompetent*. This allows them to find out what they do not

know, in order become *consciously incompetent*. Accepting this complex environment also implies that software development has to be viewed from a holistic perspective, where the actual coding is just a minor part.

**Avoiding rulebook approaches:** the organisation chose an tailored Holacracy approach, as the rigid rules did not seem to be compatible with the existing culture. This pragmatic approach of customising methodologies to fit with current needs is described as typical for the company.

**Continuous improvement:** the organisation's focus on skills as a collective and its problem-solving ability feed into the goal of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is described to rely on established communication practices, where people feel comfortable discussing mistakes or asking for help. Holacracy was initially implemented as a framework to enable continuous improvement by genuine delegation of authority, through shared ownership and empowering individuals to take control of their own tasks. As such, continuous improvement is only possible in an environment where individuals are constantly engaged in learning.

**Learning-by-doing and experimenting:** running experiments are aimed at gaining insights about the organisation's current needs. The number of experiments needs to be adjusted to how comfortable people feel with the speed of change. Similarly, most learning takes place by learning-by-doing, e.g. through client projects and support from coaches alongside. When solving problems, asking questions is seen as a powerful tool, which includes taking into account different perspectives and approaches if a set of question does not yield desired results. Tensions within the organisation is often resolved by collaboration, to ensure a diversity of perspectives (e.g. with retrospectives). With the idea of turning their graduate programme into a master's degree, the organisation shows an effort in closing the gap between learning and working, as it is convinced that there should not be a trade-off between these two inherently linked aspects. Likewise, experienced employees report it as a responsibility of their role to invest in their own learning to anticipate change.

**Transparency as the enabler of autonomy:** people need to have a shared understanding and access to relevant information if they want to live up to delegated authority in a fast-paced environment.

*"The way we think of the company: the company is an organ... It's an entity. It's not a static thing. It's a dynamic moving entity" (Szikszai / 0:01:21).*

*"I would say that the organisation has grown, rather than being built. While we've been deliberate in the steps, that we've taken... One of the most important things that we've recognised along the way is, that for a reasonable part of our time here, we are consciously incompetent. [...] Hubris and arrogance basically get in the way of good results all the time. [...] Our starting point for anything is to go: OK, we know that we're probably unconsciously incompetent. Let's at least get the consciously incompetent. Let's work out what it is we don't know. And then we can start that process of improvement. It's a lot less about the structures that we have and it's a lot more about the conversations and the purpose that we have" (Szikszai / 0:11:44).*

*"Much of this is around trying to build practices around communication. [...] They sound simple now, but they were radical conversations back then and they made people feel really uncomfortable. [...] The thing we have built, is a culture where people can feel safe to say: I don't know. Because if you can't do that, people will not grow. [...] You want those conversations to develop. In a way where people go: OK, I understand how that happened. Right. How do we make sure that it's different next time? And then you start to look at: what's the one thing you'll improve? Rather than going: Well, actually, eight things went wrong there, we've got to fix all eight things. And then you never fix all eight things. So, a lot of it's about the culture" (Szikszai / 0:13:34).*

*"We experiment a lot. [...] And we have to do that with the organisation, to work out: how do we actually get it into the best possible shape for our, for what we need right now? And so, experimentation means that you're going to try things. And some things will work and some things will not. [...] You have to be quite mindful of the sort of the general temperature. You don't want to be in a position where you're constantly changing everything, because then people get fatigued from that. But then, if you're not changing enough, then people get bored from the lack of stimulation. [...] And so that's part of the human side of things, recognising: actually, at which point are we stretching someone versus pressurising them" (Szikszai / 0:18:08).*

*"There's a quote that we use a lot: why does there seem to be enough time to do it twice, but not enough time to do it right" (Szikszai / 0:22:24).*

*"What it gives us is options. [...] Because we often think about what might happen next. And the path is never clear. You can work out what the next step is. [...] The next three, they become less clear. Right? So, we could absolutely say what they are, but we know that we'll be wrong. So, it's much better to go: OK, so let's get these next two steps done. And then we're gonna have a much better view, at that point. And we'll be able to work out what the best*

*direction is. So the goal will remain the same. [...] And we also can halfway through something go: you know what? This isn't gonna work. Let's stop. It's much better to stop halfway through than complete something that isn't going to work" (Szikszai / 0:33:12).*

*"You know, set the context and then ask the questions. And then and try and guide them as much as possible. Rather than tell them. [...] But we try not to make it a telling organisation. You know, it's one where people invest the time in those conversations" (Szikszai / 0:48:54).*

*"If you believe that everybody is good, that everybody wants to do a good job, everybody wants to improve, so on and so forth. The next step would be continuing to chip away at the ownership of continuous improvement. The deep-rooted belief that every single person in this organisation has the opportunity and is empowered and encouraged to make the organisation better" (Comerford / 1:16:52).*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Silos in a small company:** the company started adopting Agile around 2009 because it realised that even though it was small (12 employees) it had silos.

**Control-mechanisms while scaling:** a previous scaling-effort immediately led to setting up more control-mechanisms and protocols. Upon reflection, this was detected to be contradictory to the intended company culture.

*"I thought, how do you have silos in an organisation that's only twelve people? And you go, actually, because we've got people who are not practiced at communicating with each other" (Szikszai / 0:12:59).*

*"Suddenly we found ourselves scaling back up again very quickly, in response to customer demand. What I call, in a largely unstructured way. And the immediate response was: every time something goes wrong, it's because we lacked controls. [...] And that caused concern, because it seemed to completely contradict the culture that we wanted to foster" (Comerford / 0:06:24).*

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Organisational form:** Holacracy is mentioned 16 times, alongside the Netflix approach (i.e. freedom, diversity and culture document).



## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

*No data*

### Salary / Finances

**Fixed remuneration for graduate programme:** the remuneration for graduates in the graduate programme is pre-set for the duration of the three years and their salary depends on where they are in the programme.

### Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Capability versus capacity issue:** the recruiting process is owned by the leadership team for *capability* holes (i.e. expertise) and by one of the product owners for *capacity* holes (i.e. when more graduates are needed). Graduates are recruited in close collaboration with universities. The graduate programme was initially an answer to a labour market that was unable to supply the talent needed to sustain the growth of the organisation. Hiring decisions are made as a collective, involving as many people as possible.

**Candidates as whole individuals:** Candidates are not solely assessed on whether they can get the task at hand done, but what else they bring to the team (e.g. life experiences, perspectives, personality). This is based on the fundamental belief that diverse teams yield better results.

**Graduates' aptitude to learn:** during the recruiting process for graduates, the main criteria are their ability for fast learning and their ability to collaborate.

**Cultural fit:** in candidates, the organisation looks for the ability to collaborate with others, engage in problem-solving, the ability to show empathy and think customer-centric. Coaches ideally have several areas of expertise alongside a broad knowledge (i.e. pi-shaped individuals). However, the most important criterion for coaches is the ability to communicate their knowledge to others. The organisation rather leaves a role unfilled than hires someone who does not meet these criteria.

*"So, we are looking for people who can demonstrate that they can collaborate. That they've been able to show that in the past. That they can problem solve. That they can have empathy and put themselves in the shoes of the customers genuinely and try and understand, not an idealised world, but actually look at: what is the customer's context? [...] And this idea of continuous improvement,*

*there's a real focus on people who want to improve themselves and actually want to learn" (Szikszai / 0:09:58).*

*"And part of the reason for the grad[uate] programme was... [...] we were trying to find experienced people who could fit in the team. And they would need to have database skills and management skills and mobile app[lication] skills. And they had to know smartcards, and a bit of public transport. And so, you're very quickly getting down to the stage where you're looking for unicorns. Or at least semi-mythical creatures" (Szikszai / 0:44:01).*

*"But you know... I think there's another phrase that we use: it's better to have a hole in the team than an a-hole in the team" (Szikszai / 0:46:46).*

*"If someone's got the technical skills, but not the ability to teach: this is just not going to work. [...] If they don't have domain expertise, but we can see enough evidence that they could learn that, then we'll pick them up. That's what we'll prioritise" (Szikszai / 0:47:04).*

*"Look at the skills that you need to get the job done. [...] But take the time to look at all of the other aspects and perspectives that the individual is going to bring. You know: what does the whole package of life experiences, that sits before you, going to bring to your team? [...] And that will almost always yield an overall better team. And when you have a better team, you will get a better result" (Comerford / 0:16:55).*

## **On- / Offboarding**

**Head start:** the onboarding period is a chance to identify what new employees need and to help them get a head start on that learning journey.

**Onboarding document:** new key staff (i.e. everyone apart from graduates) receive a document (inspired by Netflix's freedom, diversity and culture document) concerning values and how the organisation works.

**Next roles for graduates:** Graduates join the programme for three years and after completion, are helped to find a role in another organisation.

*"At the end of three years, we're going: we will let you go, and we will help you find another role. Because having your only work experience for more than three years at one place doesn't make sense to us. You need to actually get other experiences at work. And the idea is that if people move out, that creates spaces for more people to move in" (Szikszai / 0:37:09).*

*"It's actually a very simple PowerPoint type document that we give to key staff when they start. [...] But this is a very good overview of how we operate, what we value" (Comerford / 0:00:3).*

## Development / Performance

**Emphasis on informal and on-the-job learning:** the organisation commits to creating an environment that amplifies the learning of graduates during the three-year internship. Projects are delivered by graduates in teams of four and with the support of coaches, product owners and the rest of the management team. Accordingly, learning almost entirely takes place on-the-job. The informal approach allows coaches to maximise the time with the teams. With a growing organisation, a more formalised curriculum with clear expectations around goals at the end of each year might be a next step. In a more formalised setting, the company organises brownbag lunch sessions to introduce new tools or to showcase something outside of daily work.

**Coaching approach:** Coaches (i.e. senior experts) help the development teams to acquire the knowledge and master the tools to achieve their tasks. They not only are involved in quality checks and retrospectives, but maximise teachable moments throughout the process. Coaches find their role extremely rewarding, which they describe as growing people and their skills on a day-to-day basis. The autonomy that comes with their role leads to coaches allocating time to R&D, e.g. researching new technology, as they feel the imperative to constantly keeping up with new practices to pass on.

**Performance reviews (graduate programme):** Performance reviews take place between one and three times a year and are initiated by graduates nominating a product owner and a coach. Product owners and coaches will then come together as a group (to ensure consistency) and discuss the graduate, who also completed a self-assessment. The sole purpose of the performance reviews is facilitating a conversation around the individual skills and where the self-review and assessment might differ. There are no elements that measure individuals against peers or are used for financial incentives. Reviews reflect individual growth, as the expectations change over the course of the three years: the first year is all about growing awareness and learning, the second year is about putting these learnings into practice and gaining exposure, while the third year is more about leadership and helping the team to reach an outcome. Currently, the organisation is also exploring opportunities to turn their graduate programme into a master's degree, to overcome the trade-off between education and work experience.

**No performance reviews (senior staff):** the organisation stopped doing formal performance reviews with senior staff, as it was simply seen as a chore without adding value. In place of standards reviews, senior staff members recently had the idea of gathering feedback from graduates. A first experiment has proven to be incredibly inefficient, but has shown that there is a real need and value in doing it.

**Supporting growth:** Employees are constantly challenged to see their work in relation to the big picture. What is the end customer trying to do? Whereas this process might be easier for some, it may be more difficult for others. Another challenge is the balance between extracting value from employees' existing skills while giving them the opportunity to develop new skills and following intrinsic motivation. It is described as the organisation's responsibility to support employees in their ability to change perspective as well as ensuring a balance between using existing skills and acquiring new ones. Furthermore, knowing people's individual skills is believed to be the key to forming successful teams, as they depend on having a diversity of skills, perspectives and backgrounds.

*"It's just very rewarding to [...] feed them with knowledge and get some feedback around what they're interested in, and see them take leadership in some areas. [...] And from a coaching perspective, it is just really rewarding to teach them and throw heaps of stuff at them" (Roques a / 0:08:16).*

*"If I'm trying to work out what job it is that person is trying to do, I can take a completely different approach to solving this problem. It doesn't have to be about code" (Szikszai / 0:04:42).*

*"If we've got roles and there's a fit, then we basically give people a three-year contract. And our very clear promise: we will get you up that curve as fast as we can. So, if you're up for learning, then we will basically provide a learning environment for you to do that" (Szikszai / 0:37:09).*

*"That movement is almost constant, as we are assessing individuals in this constant quest to understand where their strengths are and where their desires are. Because they may be strong in some areas, which means that, from an employer-employee relationship, we're going to get immediate value from that. That's where the bulk of our value will come from. But also within that person is a huge wealth of untapped value. [...] the fastest way to tap into that is through their desires. [...] So, being able to straddle them across two roles, for example, where they're learning this new skill that they desire, whilst executing the skill that they currently possess, is the right balance of growth*

*and value from an employer and employee perspective. If they're successful. Again, most people are successful, when given the opportunity, at doing something that they desire. Then suddenly you've added another skill into the portfolio of valuable skills that we can extract at any time. [...] And you're just constantly building this array of talent within an individual" (Comerford / 0:21:51).*

*"The purpose of the performance review is to facilitate a conversation. That's the sole purpose of it. It is not to measure you against your peers. It is not to put you in a pay bracket. All of those things are off the table. It is purely to facilitate a common understanding. [...] And what do we focus on? We focus on deltas" (Comerford / 0:57:34).*

*"We set out to create a forum through which all of the interns basically did the same structured assessment of the POs and the coaches. [...] And it was, wow, what a fascinating process. It was incredibly inefficient, [...] it hasn't quite established itself as a process. But it has established itself as a: we need to do this. [...] But goodness me, we basically shut down the organisation for the better part of a week to do it. And that's not something that we can do twice a year" (Comerford / 1:06:46).*

## **Communication / Feedback**

**Continuous and immediate feedback:** direct feedback, as a cornerstone of communication, is everyone's responsibility and expected to take place on a day-to-day basis. Fostering a multi-directional feedback culture is deemed vital for navigating a highly autonomous environment. In the company's past, people did not communicate openly, especially around impediments and admitting not knowing something. Agile as a framework helped the organisation to build practices around communicating openly. This includes ensuring a shared understanding of the company goals.

**Asking the right questions:** asking the right questions is seen as a powerful tool to solve problems and remove impediments. This includes trying a different approach (i.e. asking different questions) if a set of questions does not yield the desired results, hence fostering self-reflection. Accordingly, coaches set the context and ask questions instead of telling the answer. Investing in conversations is described as building up knowledge in the most sustainable way, as it helps individuals to be self-reliant problem-solvers.

*"If a team is concerned that failure is going to result in punishment, they are unlikely to come to you and say: I think that this approach that we're on is*

*going to fail. Because they don't want to have that conversation. [...] The organisation wants them to have that conversation as early as possible, so that we can have as many choices as possible” (Comerford / 0:42:00).*

*“Understanding how you're perceived by everybody in the organisation, is one of the most profound pieces of actionable knowledge that you could possibly acquire. It has the potential to make the biggest difference to any individual. [...] Because what my boss thinks, it's just one perspective. [...] What's important is to understand everybody's. Even those that you're not directly connected to” (Comerford / 1:14:47).*

Structure
Organisational structure

**Company structured in two main areas:** the organisation consists of development teams (i.e. about half the company) and BI (i.e. business improvement, which includes everyone else).

**Organisation as a dynamic entity:** the company operates based on an adaption of Holacracy, keeping the focus on an overarching purpose and autonomy, but choosing a less process-heavy approach. Genuine delegated authority is defined as empowering people with a vast knowledge and experience in a certain topic. On the contrary, traditional hierarchy is seen giving people the decision-making capacity who might have people management skills, but may not have the subject matter expertise. The organisation is viewed as a dynamic entity and gets compared with an organ. A fluid structure allows to continuously build an organisation that matches current needs. This includes reshuffling teams according to incoming projects.

**Role-based approach:** the organisational structure is built around the job that has to be done, which leads to roles being created. These roles can then be held by individuals and come with autonomy and empowerment. Holacracy is used as a framework to delegate authority in a genuine way and empowers role holders to change and improve things themselves. Roles are not tied to your contract with the organisation: you can accept new roles and let go of old roles within the holacratic environment.

**Project team structure:** the development teams receive guidance from two roles. The product owner ensures the alignment of the development process with the strategic intent of the organisation. The coaches work across the teams to ensure the quality of the product as well as grow the skills and

capabilities of the teams. The development teams consist of (usually four) graduates with different levels of experience.

*“The thing that I totally forgot to mention is Holacracy. It's so obvious on a day-to-day basis that you forget it exists...” (Roques b / 0:00:08).*

*“Holacracy sets up an organisational structure that gravitates around the job that has to be done. And then people organise themselves into filling roles that will achieve that. [...] you define what has to be done. Create all the roles that are required for that job to be done. And then people are fulfilling their roles. And the roles have a very precise [...] realm of autonomy” (Roques b / 0:01:03).*

*“Actually, we found by adhering strictly to Holacracy rules, it really actually started to break some of the culture here. [...] We really like the principles behind it. So, this idea of an overarching purpose, which we could then devolve to the teams and they were in control of... They basically had mastery of their processes and what they did underneath that purpose. That was, that was really important. But we just didn't like the scripts and processes, that they had around managing tensions and conflicts. [...] They actually seem to generate conflict and quite destructive conflicts as opposed to productive tension. So, we've adapted those to suit us” (Szikszai / 0:15:59).*

*“This whole concept of applying layer and layer of process starts to remove freedom and autonomy from your people. And if your people are your greatest assets, then that's the worst thing that you could do to them. [...] And if you're going to have a process-heavy organisation, you're going to lose that. By sheer definition” (Comerford / 0:07:26).*

*“We wanted to give delegated authority over the work that needs to be done. Delegated authority over domains that people were specialised in, had deep experience in. So that we could avoid this natural hierarchy of: just because somebody sits higher on the tree than me, which usually means that they have people management skills, not that they have ticketing system experience skills or, you know, BI skills or any other...” (Comerford / 0:08:55).*

*“It was a process of decision-making through consent, rather than hierarchy. That was all born from this, this avoidance of unnecessary constraint through process and bureaucracy” (Comerford / 0:11:14).*

## Self-concept of HR / People management

**Basic HR function:** ensuring cornerstones such as a reasonable salary or sick leave are viewed as a basic hygiene functions.

**Role of CTO:** the CTO in theory takes care of the strategic direction of the organisation and leads teams to achieve technical goals. In practice, the CTO changes *technology* to *talent*, and rather focuses on nurturing talent: growing the decision-making capability in the organisation and acting as a multiplier.

**People developers:** when asked about what they like most about their roles within the organisation, Product Owners and coaches unanimously reported that it was the joy of developing others and watching them grow.

*“You have to have obviously some HR function. [...] There are basic HR hygiene functions that we have to have. Like, are people being paid properly? Holiday. Sick leave. Those kinds of things” (Szikszai / 0:53:42).*

*“The much shorter version of what I do is, I’d say over the last three years, the T has moved from technology to talent. I am much more effective in my role as CTO when I’m focussed on nurturing and growing the talent within the organisation, the decision-making capability, the trust and confidence in that team. That is much more valuable than me as an individual continuing to acquire technical knowledge so I can make better decisions” (Comerford / 0:27:43).*

*“When we asked the question to the coaches and the POs: what inspires you most about your role here at Snapper? It was the feeling of responsibility for the development of others. And that shone as being the thing that would make people smile when they were talking to you. [...] You know, this is something that people genuinely value” (Comerford / 1:05:19).*

## Decision-making capacity

**Distributed decision-making:** according to Snapper, leaders should leave decision-making to others with a better subject matter expertise or deeper understanding. The leader's resources are therefore better invested in making sure that all these distributed decisions are aligned. Furthermore, employees also are more committed to decisions made by themselves, for instance because they know the intent behind it.



**Holacracy as an enabler of autonomy:** Power is not tied to traditional hierarchic functions, but is tied to roles. Role holders are trusted and empowered to use their realm of autonomy in order to get the job done.

*“In reality, the team that I have out there makes better decisions than I will most of the time. Because most of the decisions that I'm faced with ultimately can be broken down into smaller decisions that require a deeper understanding and knowledge than what I possess. So, I can certainly ensure that all the decisions are aligned, and I can sense and see when misalignments are occurring. And I can help correct that. But ultimately, decisions are better when they are made by the groups of people out there. They also buy into decisions when they are made by them rather than dictated by me”  
(Comerford / 0:24:50).*

#### 4.9. Ströer labs

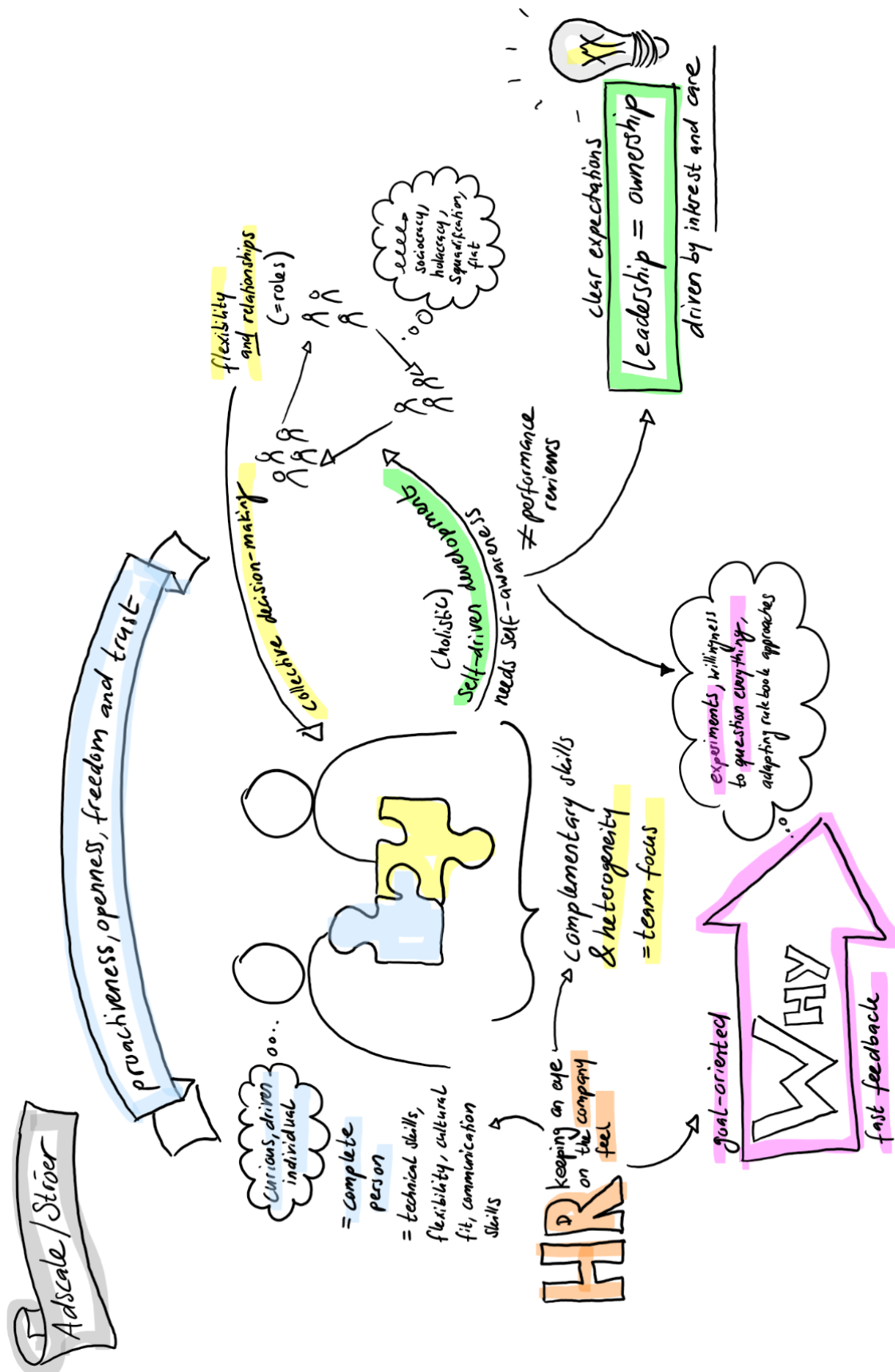


Figure 21 Concept map: Ströer labs  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Building relationships as a basic human need:** building personal and permanent relationships with team members is deemed a basic social need. Social interactions and relationship-building may also contribute to employee wellbeing. However, ensuring ongoing interaction between individuals is a major challenge in a growing organisation.

**Focus on relationship-building during onboarding enables flexibility:** building relationships within the company is deemed a cornerstone of the onboarding process. It is aimed at making conversations throughout the organisation easier later. Employees are also required to work in different teams and a variety of roles, where benefit from this networking effort.

**Open conversations:** Meetings, sessions or discussions are per default open for all organisation members to join, shall they feel a need to stay informed or want to get actively involved.

*“That generates all of those relationships with people and the ability to speak to various parts of the company. [...] And it helps to keep those conversations going. If there are issues later on, you know the person. It starts that relationship building for them” (Baldwin / 0:27:35).*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Guiding principles:** instead of a vision or mission statement, the organisation prefers to work with guiding principles, which is verbalised as doing something over something else.

**Best working environment:** the organisation’s ultimate goal is providing the best working environment possible, by making it a fun place to work with a culture that employees buy fully into.

**Pragmatism:** Pragmatism as a core principle and is based around having conversations that are rooted in reality.

**Heterogeneity and individual needs as success factor:** Individuals are always seen as components of teams that thrive on having different attributes. Diversity and heterogeneity are thus seen as a success factor of cross-functional teams, where people with complementary skills enable collaboration – with respect as a baseline for all interaction. At the same time,

people's individual needs (expressed by themselves) are considered core principle for the organisation. However, merging different views and needs can be challenging.

**Ownership and leadership interlinked:** instead of hierarchy, the organisation operates on ownership and leadership, which are seen as going hand-in-hand. Ownership and leadership are driven by strengths and interests, and by a person caring about a certain topic or area. As a result, clear expectations around this topic or area facilitate conversations around it.

**Self-awareness and flexibility:** Self-awareness is considered an important factor in a highly collaborative and autonomous environment, and is defined as knowing one's skills and being grounded in oneself. It is also a prerequisite to the flexibility needed to work across roles and teams and with different individuals, which is considered a key factor of a successful agile organisation.

**Pro-activeness, freedom and trust:** Pro-activeness, openness, freedom and the ability to trust that people are doing their best and are helping each other act as core values. Pro-activeness also includes seizing opportunities to bring one's ideas to the table and drive topics forward.

*"The core principles I would like to think that we operate by, is to try and figure out what people need on an individual level" (Baldwin / 0:00:27).*

*"They're all respecting each other for what they bring to the team. [...] if you can start to describe it in those behaviours and look at the positive side of things as well, and what everybody's bringing to the team, that's when teams really start working well" (Baldwin / 0:49:11).*

*"That's why we like working with each other. That is exactly what I was talking about. He really does fill in all of my gaps" (Baldwin / 1:10:32).*

*"He or she knows what they know. Not just seeing their value, but they are confident in their skills, presentation and how they can deal with people" (Richnow / 0:27:35).*

*"So, it's still the same: Providing the best working environment, I guess, that you can" (Richnow / 0:36:32).*

## Image of the human person

**Curiosity and kindness:** Employees are perceived as being curious and proactive about learning and growing, along with being trusted to do their best while helping others to achieve the same.

**Individuals as complete persons:** Individuals are expected to bring everything to a role, which exceeds technical skills and includes flexibility, self-awareness and communication skills as parts of a broad skills set. This reflects a holistic view on people: they are seen as complete persons and not simply as catering to a technical or specialty need.

**Individuals and team members:** People are seen as individuals and simultaneously as components of teams. Hence, it matters what they are contributing. People bring different, complementary skills and qualities to a team, which ultimately creates a high-performing team.

*“The simple way to answer that: that depends on the person. [...] Once you start working in an organisation, the individual is just a component within the team. Now, it matters what those individuals are going to contribute to the team” (Baldwin / 0:05:38).*

*“Maybe it's a way of describing what we're very conscious of. The fact that: what we want is people bringing everything to a role. We don't just pick developers because they're good developers. We pick them because they get it. To put it very holistically and broadly. We want somebody who can communicate. We want somebody who can be flexible. We want somebody who's self-aware” (Baldwin / 0:07:09).*

*“I think it goes back to that whole thing about, you know, we're trying to find a complete person. We don't want a person who can only code. We don't want the person who can only communicate. We want the works. And I'd rather take a person who's mediocre in everything, than excellent in only one thing” (Baldwin / 0:20:47).*

*“Because everything is open, free, there's an element of trust, everybody is doing their best. There's trust that they're doing their best, but helping each other as well” (Baldwin / 0:35:48).*

## Definition of leadership

**Distributed leadership and ownership:** Individuals act as leaders of topics or areas they are interested in themselves, are equipped with expertise and can thus influence decision-making. Leadership is something flexible and driven by interest and dedication. In the contrary, traditional leadership is seen as imposing team management on a person with excellent technical skills, which generally leads to unsatisfactory outcomes for all parties involved. As a result, role-based leadership is deemed vital to the company, whereas management is not. Leadership is also linked to ownership: by caring about something, employees are owning it (individually or as a group), setting expectations in that particular area. Whoever else engages in this area, has to respect those expectations. Leadership is thus defined by personality and delegation.

*"We don't knight people and say: you are in charge of this. But there are people who will be able to influence decisions. And we'll use that in a pretty flexible way in certain areas, areas that they are interested in. [...] It wasn't the hierarchy that was the problem, it was that they were imposing on a person, who was probably a very good technical person, all of the team management stuff. Which they're not necessarily very good at. And they find it stressful. So why ask them to do it? Why not have other people who are interested in that area doing that for you? And what it ends up as is kind of everybody's a little bit of a manager of their own little space, whatever that is" (Baldwin / 0:59:39).*

*"Maybe that's what I'm saying, that we clearly talk about leadership as an important thing. Management isn't. Management is not talked about in this organisation. [...] To create a person who just cares about that particular thing. If they have ownership of that. Leadership and ownership, they kind of go together. [...] Everybody can touch everything. But now with the formation of chapters, we're starting to get clarity around who owns what, who is the leader. And that may be a group of people, rather than an individual. [...] They have to make the expectations clear. [...] They are the ones that find this stuff important. They care about it. And they own it" (Baldwin / 1:08:19).*

*"Very loose. Leadership is probably one of the loosest areas. Again, Ben is the CEO. He basically has the last word, and he makes most of the company decisions. I tend to be a second hand to him. And then the next level of the leadership is basically whoever the team sees as an... We don't have team lead as such, but we have a team member as somebody who basically tries to pull the team together. [...] There will be, out there, in every team, somebody who basically is, by virtue of personality or delegation, a leader, if you like. And*

*that's about it, I guess. There's no other means of leadership. Or other leadership. It's more role-based" (Richnow / 0:29:58).*

## Learning organisation

**Imperative to question the status-quo:** all organisation members are expected to question existing ideas and concepts or answers that make them feel uncomfortable. This ability to question and adjust everything is deemed being truly agile, as everything needs to be up for evolution. As a prerequisite, individuals need to be self-aware and able to communicate, while teams thrive on a diversity of attributes that allow for different perspectives.

**Experimentation and mistakes over rulebook approaches:** Rulebook approaches need to be questioned and adapted to individual needs, as Agile is defined by constant questioning of both process and goals. Implementation and experimentation (e.g. trial periods for changes) are valued over documentation. Failed experiments are not seen as failure, but as a way of evaluating needs and desires. Again, this requires individuals to make mistakes and have the ability to openly reflect on them.

**Focussing on goals and customers:** keeping both goals and the *why* in view is deemed a key factor of successful change. At the same time, a constant focus on customer needs and delivery prevents getting lost in details and dead-ends. However, fostering ongoing conversation around goals and processes can be very time-consuming.

**People's ability to cope with change:** how employees deal with the ongoing change needs to be embedded in the process. Investing in communication training so individuals can detach frustration and voice their concerns are considered beneficial to obtain quality feedback.

*"Question something over taking an answer that you don't feel comfortable with" (Baldwin / 0:01:36).*

*"Very quickly we find: this bit doesn't work for us. And we're fairly comfortable with saying: right, we'll just throw that bit of the rulebook away. It's something that Scrum purists, for example, would probably scream and yell over and say: no, you can't... If you are going to do Scrum, you do it properly. Frankly, I think that's unhealthy. I think it's actually un-agile. It stops you questioning your process, as well as the very things you're trying to do" (Baldwin / 0:04:01).*

*“That's the agile principle, in my head, you've got to be willing to question everything. You've got to be willing to adjust everything. Everything's up for evolution. And if you sit still and just carry on that process, because that's the way it was written, you're missing something” (Baldwin / 0:21:46).*

*“And I think that's the critical element for all agile things, that you should be very much focussed on what the business needs to deliver. [...] At some point, if you're not getting a constant feed of product to build, you will fall back to solving just technical problems. And developers can spend an awful lot of time and effort on technical problems and publishing things to the n-th degree. And going back to my statement about pragmatism, I'd much prefer to be building something that was making money for the company and know that we all had a future than to accidentally go out of business because the product we have just doesn't serve our customers' needs. So in my mind, that is another one of the core principles of Agile. You focus on what your customer wants, and you deliver what your customer asks for” (Baldwin / 0:32:18).*

*“We made a couple of bad mistakes as well, in introducing it into the company. We tried to build on our existing organisation, which on reflection was a bad idea” (Baldwin / 0:57:17).*

*“And then Sociocracy, and then Holacracy was introduced, because that didn't work. And that didn't work either. But these were crucial things to find out what we really want” (Richnow / 0:08:37)<sup>101</sup>.*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

*No data*

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Assessments:** the use of DISC chart (behavioural analysis profile) (incl. EQ) is mentioned as a method to create behavioural analysis profiles, as well as the Hartman Personality Profile (*Personality Colours*).

**Form of organisation:** Holacracy is repeatedly mentioned (ten times in total), alongside one naming of Sociocracy.

<sup>101</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und dann wurde Soziokratie, und dann Holakratie eingeführt, weil das nicht funktioniert hatte. Und das hat dann auch nicht funktioniert. Aber das sind Dinge, die bestimmt ausschlaggebend waren, um herauszufinden, was wir eigentlich wollen.*



## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

**HR is not administration:** HR is mentioned as a field separate from administration and finances and summarised as keeping track of the general company feel.

### Salary / Finances

**No transparent salaries:** due to legal restrictions (i.e. being tied to a parent company in Germany) complete salary transparency is impossible. However, assuring pay parity (e.g. gender-related) has always been important.

**Salary reviews tied to seniority:** Salary reviews are facilitated around the seniority of an employee (i.e. Junior, Intermediate, Senior) and the expectations associated with each of these categories.

### Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Holistic view on candidates and checking for cultural fit:** Candidates are not judged against technical criteria or factual knowledge alone, but in a holistic way. They also have to be able to communicate (including addressing problems openly and accepting different points of view), bring ideas to the table and interact with people, be flexible and self-aware. Core principles to check for during the recruiting process match the Scrum methodology (e.g. openness). At the end of the day, the technical and cultural (or social) fit is equally important when looking at candidates. The decision whether a candidate is a cultural fit is then described as a collective gut-feeling.

**Collaborative recruiting with a focus on diversity:** ensuring heterogeneity and diversity in the actual teams is a main focus when recruiting, as different perspectives are seen as valuable. Teams are the unit that does most of the recruiting. However, all other organisation members are invited to participate in the assessment of candidates, to ensure they fit within the wider culture of the organisation, thus preventing the formation of fragmented sub-cultures. However, it is not mandatory as only people with a strong interest in the area should actively participate. Because everyone in the company has to agree on new hires, it can turn into a rather lengthy process. However, the organisation is convinced that this process is beneficial in the long run and is hence willing to invest the time and resources. Employees are also not replaced immediately. Instead, an employee exit triggers a company-wide process of assessing the company's needs (i.e. skills missing) at this point in time.

**Basic technical ability test (online) for potential candidates:** the recruiting group assesses incoming CVs (sourced by standards advertising or recruitment agents). Potential candidates fill out a brief online test on basic technical ability (role-depending). While there is a belief that anybody could learn anything, guaranteeing basic technical skills saves time and ensures a baseline of mutual understanding and respect when new employees join.

**Recruiting process checks for compatibility with way of working:** Potential candidates come in for an hourly interview with HR and two company members, in an informal setting over a cup of coffee. After that, candidates take part in a half-day interview on-site, which is opened by candidates talking about a (non-technical) topic of their choice in front of the whole company (approx. 15 minutes). This is deemed a major indicator for the rest of the hiring process. They then meet a few other employees to chat to and are given an actual task. The reasoning behind this multi-step process is the search for a *complete* person and not just a specialist in a certain area. It also ensures exposure to as much of the company as possible (e.g. people, work environment, communication style), to assess whether candidates would be a good fit for the highly collaborative way of working.

**Suitability for non-traditional career paths:** another criterion during recruiting is whether candidates can envision themselves working in a non-hierarchical setting without systematic succession or career planning.

*“You want a cross-functional team that has all of the perspectives that you can possibly fit into that team. Within the scope of seven or eight people. It's sometimes a challenge. Especially given that teams, by default, will choose the people that are most like them” (Baldwin / 0:08:46).*

*“The stupid answer to that, I'm really comfortable with now, after having done it a number of times: go with your gut. Yes, it's as simple as that. We're humans. And we really do understand what people we like, what people we don't like. [...] I think the other critical part of that is: you go with your gut, but you also go with everybody's gut. You find a mechanism that allows you a safe way of saying: you know, we three are all making this assessment. You've got certain values that you hold high. Suzanne's got different ones. I will have different ones. And we have to find a way of merging those things, in a kind of a clear and hopefully understanding way” (Baldwin / 0:10:51).*

*“I mean, we literally let everybody make their decision, of whether we're going to have that person on the team. And we've learnt not to rush the process. You might want to fill the spot quickly. But actually, when we do that, that's when*

*things tend to go wrong. [...] When we've got a position, if it's from somebody leaving, we don't necessarily fill that position. We throw it out the company and go: OK, what do we really need at this point? You know, it might be a developer, it might be a tester, it might be something completely different. And then right from that point, everybody's onboard with where we're going and why. And it can be, like I said, it can be quite drawn out. But it seems to work for us in the long run" (Moreton / 0:10:51).*

*"We will have a group of people who are generally interested in this part of the process. [...] we would like people to be involved, but we don't want people to be involved unless they're interested in a particular area. And some people are interested in recruitment and others are not" (Baldwin / 0:14:24).*

*"When people come in and go: [...] What's my succession plan? I'm really not sure whether we're the right company for you. There isn't one" (Moreton 1:02:31).*

*"Could I work together with this person? Because that really is the main question, isn't it? It's not just pure knowledge, it's also working together, because we do a lot of Pair Programming. And that means people have to somehow get along" (Richnow / 0:03:06)<sup>102</sup>.*

## **On- / Offboarding**

**Onboarding mentorship:** new employees are teamed with onboarding mentors for 1-2 month and then lined up with a different mentor, to expose them to different aspects and provide different learning opportunities. For the same reason, new employees have a lot of interaction with different teams during the onboarding period.

**Onboarding retrospectives:** Onboarding retrospectives are held with new employees at week five, week nine and week twelve (as 360° reviews), together with HR and team members who want to give feedback. The retrospectives cover technical, personal as well as cultural aspects. After the three-month trial period, new employees complete an assessment (i.e. behavioural analysis profile) to indicate areas of potential future development.

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<sup>102</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Könnte ich mit dem zusammenarbeiten? Das ist eigentlich die Hauptfrage, nicht? Es ist nicht nur das Fachwissen, es ist auch, weil, wir machen viel Pair Programming, arbeiten zusammen. Und die Leute müssen auch in irgendeiner Art miteinander klarkommen.*

*“And that's everything from the technical stuff: how am I going technically? Through to: how are you going on a personal basis? How are you going with the culture? How are you going with the company fit? So we sit in a room and kind of go: what are good things? What's going really well? What are you achieving? What are the things that you're finding you need help with? Or what stuff can get you through to that next level? What are you lost in? All those things. So, it's like little touchstones all the way through the first three months. Keeping in contact with them” (Moreton / 0:26:09).*

*“But then after lining them up with a mentor for a given time, could be a month or two, we then try to shift them to a different mentor as well. So he is exposed to other aspects and another base of learning and other stuff” (Moreton / 0:17:57).*

## Development / Performance

**Personal development is self-driven:** Conversations (e.g. around personality profiles) may illuminate opportunities for growth. These conversations increasingly happen within squads and chapters, where areas for development are exposed by team dynamics and interaction with others. While it is seen as the company's role to facilitate this process, it ultimately it is up to individual employees to drive their learning. They decide themselves how they want to spend their training budget, as they know best whether they want to broaden or deepen their knowledge, or branch out completely. Individuals are encouraged to put their hand up if they want to develop into a different role. HR reminds employees to spend their training budget and also gives the OK (together with a senior developer who has taken on the role as wellbeing champion).

**Emphasis on soft skills:** the organisation has recently invested in company-wide training about change management, resilience, communication and giving quality feedback in order to enable employees to cope with ongoing changes. The general stance of the company is that people cannot change unless they are willing to change. Self-awareness is seen as the key to facilitate this process. Across the company, a shift is noted in how the individual training budget spent, with increased spending on wellbeing aspects (e.g. meditation or gym memberships).

**Seniority levels instead of labels:** the company is not built around career paths in the traditional sense. Instead, it uses a system of maturity (i.e. *Junior*, *Intermediate* and *Senior*), which is tied to certain expectations (e.g. social, technological or managerial). *Junior*: learning and working on your own skills

set. *Intermediate*: team-oriented and driving topics within the team (while championing your own skills set). *Senior*: bigger picture and driving company-wide topics (while championing the other two layers). Expectations around these levels are clarified during annual salary reviews. Seniority levels reflect taking on additional responsibilities by acting as a champion in a certain area or taking initiative to improving certain aspects. Often, this is linked to stepping outside one's comfort zone. There are no other formal labels.

**Focus on team dynamics:** regular assessments (e.g. personality profiles with behaviours and motivators) on a team- or company-level may facilitate conversations around relationships, team dynamics and create a common language around it. Individual behaviour should always be looked at from a team-perspective as well, as high-performing cross-functional teams require individuals with very different personal profiles.

**No formal performance reviews:** there are mandatory 360° reviews during onboarding, which become optional afterwards (for individual or teams). While there are no formal performance reviews, individuals are encouraged to reach out to others for feedback (i.e. seniors or peers) to help identify next steps or facilitate understanding.

*"It is the biggest change we've made in the last twelve years to our processes. There's certainly an element of risk about that. [...] And we spent quite a bit of time last year in just preparing everybody for: there is going to be a change coming in. And doing some change management training. Communication workshops and things like that. I think one of them was actually a resilience training, so, just really understanding what's happening" (Baldwin / 0:36:41).*

*"One of the other things we do, after we've done the three-month trial period, we put them through a DISC, behavioural analysis profile. [...] So, the one about behaviours, motivators. [...] And that's where the whole self-awareness stuff comes in. So, we go through that with every individual. Their own kind report. It's that point where you can kind of say: look, this is where you might come into trouble. These are areas that you can work on. And it's up to them whether they drive it or not, whether they want to" (Moreton / 0:44:07).*

*"And it's up to them. The annual training budget. And it's up to them to drive it. So we don't, deliberately, don't put any constraints on it. Because you might have people who want to continue down their wormhole. But then you've got other people who want to go: actually, no, I've done this five years. I want to do something else. How do I expand out of that? And so we fully support that" (Moreton / 0:50:31).*

*“How do I get onto that squad? And what value am I going to add to that? But it's very self-driven. We expect individuals to put their hands up. And then it's up to the rest of us, as a company, to work out how we can do that for every person” (Baldwin / 0:51:10).*

*“Once you're in there, you're working with those people, your attributes expose themselves very quickly to all of those people. And generally, where there's enough goodwill, and we try and foster that... You know, their areas for development are highlighted by the people they're working with, and we can try and find space for them, for them to do that” (Baldwin / 0:51:44).*

*“People that work here, they are mostly aware that it's flat and there is no hierarchy, in terms of, you can progress. The expectation is, people go from, more the seniority, from Junior to Intermediate to Senior. That lets you take on more challenges, first in the team and in the company. That you try to find areas, where they can be the champion, or that they can master. And say: OK, I want to see a certain aspect improved. And it involves maybe just one team, or the entire company, and they are then responsible. [...] But for most people, it means stepping outside their comfort zone and try to achieve baby steps. Sometimes it requires help. Sometimes you need to find feedback, sounding boards and whatever. But it works by large. And then some people are just happy doing their work” (Richnow / 0:15:42).*

*“In the past it was more aligned with, I guess, technical things like conferences, books and courses. Now, it's kind of more open to services like meditation, wellbeing, gym membership, swimming” (Richnow / 0:18:03).*

## **Communication / Feedback**

**Fast and direct feedback:** in order to connect employees with the end customer, fast feedback loops are used to continuously check for progress and early warning signs. This tightly knit, iterative process is aimed at fostering communication flow and realistic conversations. To achieve this, employees need to be able to discuss issues openly, understand different points of view and involve other people if they cannot reach a conclusion themselves.

**Communication as an investment:** to obtain quality feedback and avoid frustration, the organisation recently invested in communication training. Understanding change, being able to voice concern (detached from personal feelings) and having a common language is viewed as a catalyst for feedback and organisational learning – even though it might create a large overhead in transitional periods.

**Goal-orientation:** OKRs (i.e. objective key results) are used to maintain a focus on mutual goals, which also prevents blurry communication in a growing organisation. Visualising work is used as a tool for strategy delivery.

**Balancing open communication with ownership:** the organisation seemingly profits from mechanisms where issues can be raised and discussed collectively. All conversations are open for employees to join, which also carries the risk of communication overload. The creation of subdomains may reduce this issue, but depends on employees trusting each other. Clear ownership of subdomains creates explicit responsibilities and expectations.

**Informal and on-demand feedback:** Trials of formal feedback systems are reported to have failed in the past due to the lack of buy-in from employees. They were seen as bureaucratic chores without any real value added. Instead, management feedback is now available on-demand, e.g. if employees feel uncertain in their development or want to discuss next career steps. Feedback can be anything: technical, personal or cultural. However, actually taking the time during busy days for on-demand feedback can be challenging. Another feedback form are anonymous, hand-written thank-you-notes that get collected and read out aloud every month during the company update.

*“That starts to touch on what we also like to do as an organisation: taking a pragmatic approach. I think pragmatism is one of our core principles as well. So we want, at any time, to have conversations that are rooted in reality” (Baldwin / 0:02:50).*

*“It's that continuous: [...] am I doing the thing I'm meant to do by the rest of the team? It's a quick check-in. From an organisational perspective. Again, you go back to the holistic thing. It isn't just about: Am I doing the right thing? It's the: am I doing the right thing in the right way? [...] And the best way [...] is to actually keep your development loops incredibly tight. So really fast feedback from: here's an idea. I make a code change. I get it into production. And I get feedback about the thing that worked. If you get those iterative changes working, the small, tiny changes working, then all of the feedback happens. And it flows through the rest of the company. People start talking again. People start communicating much better” (Baldwin / 0:23:48).*

*“Why am I getting frustrated about this? Hopefully being able to detach the frustration from the feeling and being able to talk about it. So that we can, we can actually get quality feedback about: what are the things that are wrong? Rather than: I'm just pissed off. And worst case: I'm pissed off and I'm leaving” (Baldwin / 0:36:41).*

*“And it's given us a common language that some people do use, some people don't” (Moreton / 0:46:41).*

*“And those sessions are never closed. Maybe the reverse is a problem that we have. We have a lot of conversations and most people feel a need to know what's going on. I think the fear of missing out is one of the big problems we have. Because they know that there's lots of conversations going on. If they joined every single one of them, they wouldn't get anything else done. [...] Maybe [...] we need to start identifying those subdomains. And getting those chapters formed around the subdomains. And then just allowing people to focus just on that stuff and say: I trust the people over there, they will do their job, I will do mine, and that's fine” (Baldwin / 0:53:39).*

*“So, we've discussed those chapters before. We have a very open code base. Everybody can touch everything. But now with the formation of chapters, we're starting to get clarity around who owns that, who is the leader. And that may be a group of people, rather than an individual. But their responsibilities are exactly the same. They have to make the expectations clear. They have to make what they see... They are the ones that find this stuff important. They care about it. And they own it” (Baldwin / 1:09:06).*

## Structure

### Organisational structure

**Flat structure:** the company uses an organisational structure described as a flat and minimal, with chapters and guilds who autonomously solve their own problems and are aligned by OKRs. A general circle is the only existing company-wide structure. This set-up is the result of a number of experiments with different organisational forms (e.g. Sociocracy and Holacracy).

**Legal restrictions:** having a parent company may limit the scope of restructuring the legal basis of a company, which in this case hindered a full adoption of Holacracy. Furthermore, local HR legislation also poses certain challenges to the organisational flexibility.

*“And that is an incredibly interesting idea. I was very keen on allowing that to evolve. But that really challenges a lot of HR law, actually” (Baldwin / 0:55:21).*

### Self-concept of HR / People management

**Sensor and inclusive driver:** the dedicated HR person acts as a driver for (and shaper of) people-related processes, while acting as a sensor for the general



feel of the company. All HR-related work is done inclusively and collaboratively.

*“I mean, she took over a while ago, all HR aspects, really. I never was involved in HR as such. I mean, the way she drives it, is again more inclusive. [...] Which process we go for, and define the process. So she's managing everything HR related. Problems as well, if they should occur. Keeps an eye, in general, on the feel in the company, which is really nice” (Richnow / 0:37:29).*

### Decision-making capacity

**Collaborative decision-making driven by interest:** Employees are encouraged to be actively involved in decision-making (e.g. in recruiting), yet only if they are interested in that particular area. Employees are also urged to team with others who share the same interests (e.g. technology) and collaborate.

**Self-driven and self-organised development:** Individuals engage in smaller roles outside their main role and take on responsibilities in a self-driven process, which is believed to increase employee engagement and commitment. Individual development is entirely self-organised, which is reinforced by a non-restricted annual training budget. Squads (i.e. teams) act as a sounding board for individual development, e.g. by highlighting areas of development by interaction. Squads thus also drive discussions around individual development, skills and team fit.

**Self-organised chapters:** cross-organisational chapters (i.e. communities or areas of expertise) define and document themselves, e.g. what they are about, which concerns they are addressing or which skills they are looking for in potential members.

**Ad-hoc and collaborative problem-solving:** there are various processes to ensure everyone's voice is heard. As a rule of thumb, employees sort out their own problems, which includes ad-hoc decision-making with an open invitation to whomever is affected by the outcome, or merely interested in aiding as a problem-solver. Company-wide issues are dealt with when individuals raise them in the general circle (e.g. the introduction of health and wellbeing aspects for the whole company). Again, collaborative decision-making is used in this space.

*“And the same goes for pretty much all of our areas of work. If you're interested in this particular technology, then you join with others that are, and*

*work on it. So, those people that are interested in recruitment will come together” (Baldwin, 0:14:24).*

*“And what we're doing, as we evolve, that idea is to start to expose, in documentation, literally in confluence, just written up: this is what the chapter is about. These are our major concerns” (Baldwin / 0:52:10).*

*“Everybody's voice is heard at a given level or given forum. And people sort out their own problems” (Richnow / 0:13:37).*

*“I mean, he is probably more a senior engineer, he's a developer. [...] And he took on this entire wellbeing space. Just being responsible. And he's really into it. [...] So he really stepped up in that area” (Richnow / 0:19:35).*

#### 4.10. Unic

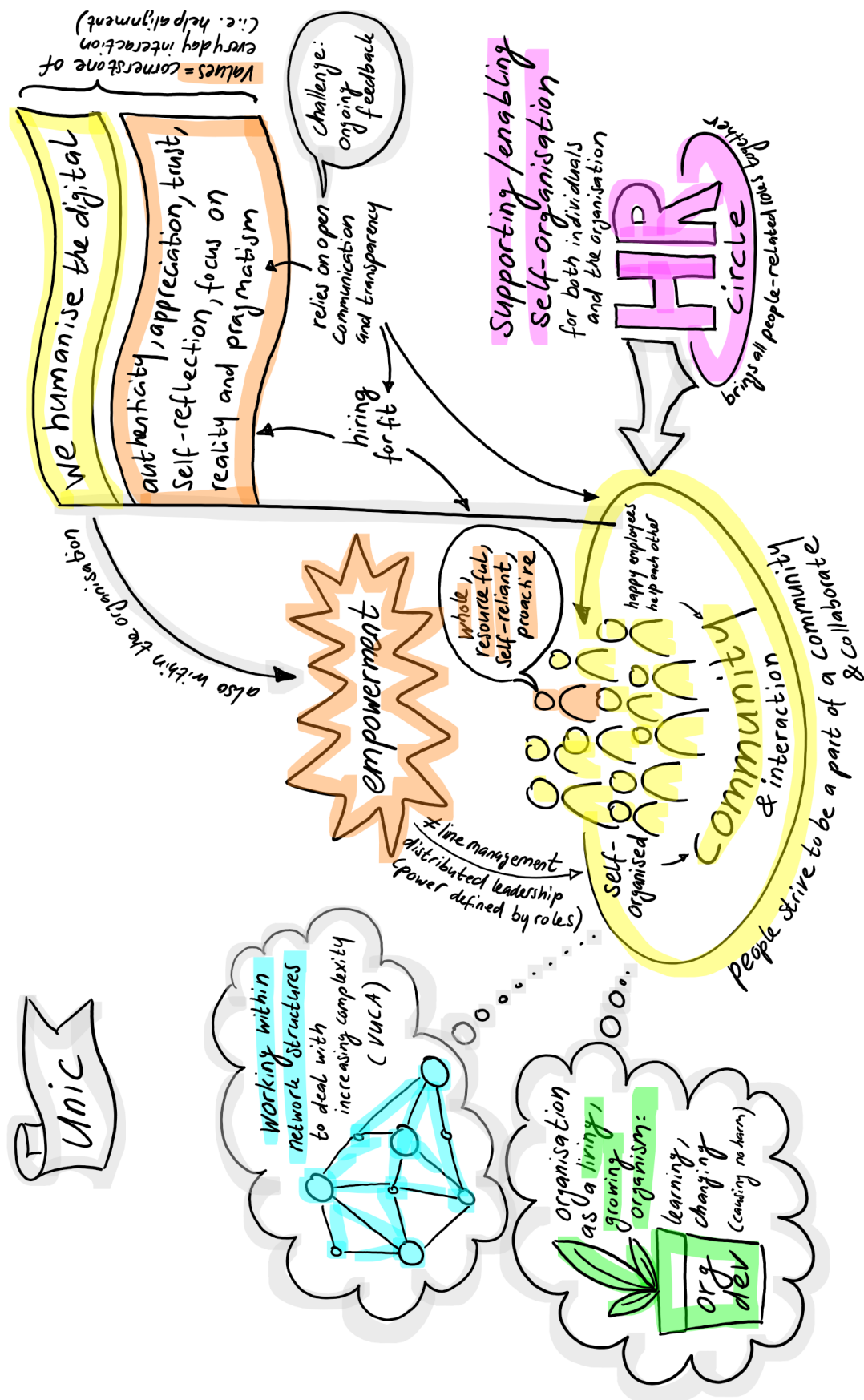


Figure 22 Concept map: Unic  
Own figure

## Values

### Networks / Relationships

**Humans strive to be part of a community:** Working within network structures is described as a result of increasing complexity of topics and projects. The company is convinced that as humans, we strive to be part of a community, are naturally inclined to collaborate and want to express our whole selves. Accordingly, the organisation allows employees to be self-reliant entrepreneurs while emphasising community-building. Strong personal relationships among employees are encouraged, and people's willingness to help each other is seen as a sign they take the community feel seriously.

*"And that whole topic of: building more networks. [...] Because things keep getting more complex. [...] Also, our projects, they're always a bit different. Which means you really have to adjust to the needs. And that requires a certain flexibility" (Voggenberger / 0:58:02)<sup>103</sup>.*

*"Because we are all people. And we are all interested in being a part of a community. And I think it's also necessary to take care of this community" (Blum / 0:13:23)<sup>104</sup>.*

### Purpose / Values / Principles

**Values, purpose and code of conduct:** the company's core values are described as phrasing implicit attitudes of what is important to them in everyday interaction. Instead of a vision or mission statement, it uses an overarching purpose as a tool for alignment in an environment of distributed authority. A third element is a general code of conduct, derived from former leadership principles and now following the maxim of distributed leadership.

**Focus on reality and pragmatism:** the company emphasises solving actual tensions instead of discussing fictional problems and uses short-term strategies for the most pressing issues (e.g. for the upcoming six months).

**Self-reliance and trust:** at its very core, the company believes in the good in people and their ability to self-organise, their competencies and passion. Conversely, this also means that the company needs to look after people, allow them to feel connected and content. These initial values are balanced

<sup>103</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Oder eben auch das ganze Thema: Mehr Netzwerk schaffen. [...] Weil die Themen einfach komplexer werden. [...] Also, auch diese, diese Projekte, die wir haben, die sind immer ein wenig anders. Und die musst du immer extrem auf die Anforderungen anpassen. Und da braucht es halt eine gewisse Flexibilität.*

<sup>104</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Denn wir sind alles Menschen. Und wir sind auch alle daran interessiert, dass wir Teil einer Gemeinschaft sind. Und da finde ich, da musst du dich auch um diese Gemeinschaft kümmern.*

with the values of delivering top quality and efficiency. Fostering understanding for each other within a larger community depends on every employee openly communicating, asking for help and being interested in others, which includes showing appreciation.

**Delegated authority and empowerment:** the company uses delegated authority for empowerment. Self-organisation is also believed to contribute to intrinsic motivation. This role-based approach is built around the idea of empowered individuals, making their own decision and taking ownership in areas where they skilled in, thus enabling change and innovation. By distributing decision-making capacity, bottlenecks are removed, and former managers may focus on other roles than simply being a point of escalation. The system relies heavily on individual proactivity, which means that some may be overwhelmed initially or need more guidance than others.

*“We’re always authentic. Which also depends on the situation and the context. And one’s personality. [...] Speaking of role models, it’s extremely important to accept responsibility, to embody culture and values. [...] And to do what you’re good at. [...] Meaning that you find things linked to your strengths. [...] And then, appreciation and trust, that’s something we’ve always had in our culture. And that’s not something that can be taken for granted, either. [...] At the end of the day, people want to feel appreciated. And in this kind of organisation, that’s kind of a zero-sum game. If you want to receive it, you have to give it as well” (Voggenberger / 0:02:51)<sup>105</sup>.*

*“A proactive person for sure is better suited to this system than a person who waits for the weather to improve, so to speak” (Voggenberger / 0:43:44)<sup>106</sup>.*

*“This human component. I think you always have to consciously account for it, regardless of the chosen framework. [...] you really have to embed it in your culture to make it work” (Voggenberger / 1:00:50)<sup>107</sup>.*

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<sup>105</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir verhalten uns stets authentisch. Das heisst eben auch: Situatives Ausrichten. Abhängigkeiten von der Persönlichkeit. [...] Vorbildthemen, das ist sicher wichtig, dass man Verantwortung übernimmt, dass wir die Kultur und die Werte leben. [...] Und dass man halt das macht, was man kann. [...] Also, dass man auch irgendwie diese Dinge findet, in denen man halt seine Stärken drin hat. [...] Dann etwas, was wir schon immer hatten, ist das Thema Wertschätzung und Vertrauen. Das ist auch nicht immer selbstverständlich. [...] Aber dass wir uns halt immer wieder auch, sozusagen, bewusst machen, dass der Mensch am Schluss des Tages extrem wichtig findet, dass er Wertschätzung bekommt. Und das Thema ist jetzt halt in dieser Organisation ein bisschen ein Nullsummenspiel. Also, wenn jemand haben will, dann muss jemand geben.*

<sup>106</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also, der Mensch, der proaktiv ist, ist in diesem System natürlich extrem viel besser aufgehoben als der, der halt auf das schöne Wetter wartet.*

<sup>107</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Du hast halt immer diese Komponente Mensch. Oder? Und ich glaube, das ist bei all diesen Systemen ist das einfach etwas, das man anschauen muss. [...] das ist wirklich etwas, das muss in der Kultur verankert werden, damit es funktioniert.*

## Image of the human person

**People are whole and authentic:** the company follows the principle that all individuals should be allowed to be their authentic selves at work, without having to play a role or hide behind a professional mask. They are also encouraged to embrace their emotions and intuition. As a result, the company should create an environment where people can connect on a deeper level.

**People as resourceful and good:** there is a strong belief in individual abilities, including the ability to learn from mistakes. Self-reflection is deemed an innate skill that might be dormant due to socialisation (e.g. through education or work experience). This aligns with the baseline of people as being good and honest. With that baseline, it is vital to question one's own behaviour first before jumping to conclusions or judgement.

*"We believe in people's good nature, in self-organisation, in every single person's abilities" (Schlegel / 0:05:37)<sup>108</sup>.*

*"That you can be yourself, first and foremost. And that we don't make them feel like they have to disguise, walk around in a suit all day and not speak of themselves. In the contrary, that they can feel like they're among friends, rather than co-workers" (Blum / 0:15:07)<sup>109</sup>.*

## Definition of leadership

**Distributed leadership:** the former leadership principles have been translated into a general code of conduct, as the definition of leadership changes within self-organisation. Management careers in the traditional sense are no longer possible within the organisation. The awareness that self-organisation may not need managers, but might still need leaders, is slowly growing. As self-organisation centres around individual strengths, new leaders emerge and take on more responsibility. With this definition, leadership occurs when people chose to follow others because of their behaviour, personality or ability to engage others. Leaders might also provide support for employees who struggle with the new system, hence preventing inequity and imbalance.

*"And we said: we no longer have any managers. But that we still need leaders, that took some time to sink in. And that's nothing negative. It could simply*

<sup>108</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Wir glauben an das Gute im Menschen, an die Selbstorganisation, an die Fähigkeiten jedes Einzelnen.*

<sup>109</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Dass man einfach und vor allem sich selber sein darf. Dass man ihnen das Gefühl gibt, nicht: Du musst dich verstellen, du musst jeden Tag im Anzug herumlaufen und darfst irgendwie nichts von dir erzählen. Sondern, dass sie sich hier mehr wie unter Freunden fühlen, als unter Arbeitskollegen.*

*mean someone in the organisation taking the lead in a certain topic" (Schlegel / 0:35:13)<sup>110</sup>.*

*"It means that this power, that used to be concentrated within a single manager, kind of crumbles into different smaller parts" (Voggenberger / 0:11:29)<sup>111</sup>.*

*"That was actually a point of criticism for us: who's stepping up when we're all struggling? And funnily enough, that made us realise that not all leadership topics are bad" (Voggenberger / 0:24:50)<sup>112</sup>.*

## Learning organisation

**Self-organisation takes time:** Holacracy has been implemented as a framework for self-organisation, as the change itself can be daunting enough. Holacratic organisations are reported to go through different stages of maturity. The first 18 months are described as pure learning, until the organisation could actually start reaping the benefits of self-organisation. However, the organisation still declares to be in the beginning stage..

**Fluid and dynamic structure:** the fluid structure allows to continuously build an organisation that matches current needs, (e.g. (dis-)establishment of circles or roles). The organisation is in a constant re-calibration between centralisation and decentralisation, between alignment and autonomy. Self-organisation allows new leaders to emerge, as they can craft their own roles without being restricted to a pre-existing job profile that might not match their individual strengths. As such, role holders are trusted to make decisions within their realm of autonomy in an attempt to deal with complexity.

**Small changes and experiments:** due to the dynamic nature of the organisation and its environment, fast changes and small improvements are incorporated into short-term (e.g. six months) and local strategies (e.g. per circle). The leading question: is it safe enough to try? With this in mind, changes simply have to be a bit better than previous solutions, without the need to be perfect. Tensions are deemed a natural part of self-discovery and are to be resolved as quickly as possible. In doing so, the organisation empowers role holders to address actual issues instead of trying to solve

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<sup>110</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben gesagt: Wir haben keine Vorgesetzten mehr. Aber, dass es nach wie vor Leader braucht, das muss auch wieder wachsen. Und dass es auch nichts Negatives ist. Und das kann ja irgendjemand in der Organisation sein, der den Lead für ein Thema übernimmt.*

<sup>111</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und eben, damit meint man auch, dass du diese Macht, die vorher sozusagen bei der Führungsperson war, dass die jetzt halt wie in verschiedene Teile aufgebröckelt wird.*

<sup>112</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Das war effektiv ein Kritikpunkt, dass wir sagten: Hey, wenn irgendwie alle im Elend sind, wer schaut dann? Und dort kam dann das lustigerweise plötzlich hervor, dass wir gemerkt haben, dass halt diese Chef-Themen eben nicht nur schlecht sind.*



hypothetical problems through adding more rules and regulations. The organisation is also convinced that people learn through making mistakes and experimenting, which therefore needs to be encouraged.

**Self-reflection as a core skill:** as the system relies on people's ability to solve problems, show initiative and learn from challenges, self-reflection is reported to become an increasingly important skill within self-organisation. Self-reflection is seen as an innate human skill, that might simply be dormant. Depending on their socialisation, employees may have to unlearn behaviour, for example dealing with fictional problems or not trusting one another.

*"With this shift, an individual can simply say: is it safe enough to try? And if it is, then it gets done, right? And otherwise, it just gets rolled back. This leads to extremely fast, positive changes. And it doesn't need to be the perfect solution, it only needs to be a bit better than before. And then it's already better, and can already be implemented" (Voggenberger / 0:07:04)<sup>113</sup>.*

*"At the very start, you really tend to anticipate problems. We said we're not going to do that. We wait and see. And whenever there's a tension popping up, we tackle it with whatever is necessary. [...] you notice that if you allow certain things first, then the decision is always better, because you never have all the information beforehand anyway" (Voggenberger / 0:23:12)<sup>114</sup>.*

*"That's another point of criticism you often hear about Holacracy: what if the apprentice just buys an Aston Martin? [...] Are people entitled to do whatever they want? And you're like: wait a second, what's our image of people? Common sense? Why should anyone do that" (Voggenberger / 0:44:55)<sup>115</sup>?*

*"For example, I can implement change if it doesn't cause harm. That's a small sentence, but it's a major change! That's this VUCA model as well, [...] if you look at it, then you realise that those cycles are shorter and shorter [...]. And that's why I also believe that we need more agile ways to approach things, right" (Voggenberger / 0:54:46)<sup>116</sup>?*

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<sup>113</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und jetzt mit diesem Shift kann einfach jemand sagen: Ist es safe enough to try? Und wenn es so ist, dann wird es gemacht, oder? Und sonst sagt man einfach: Gut, wir setzen es zurück. Das führt zu extrem schnellen, aber auch positiven Veränderungen. Und das zweite ist halt, dass man sagt: Es muss nicht die perfekte Lösung sein, sondern es muss ein bisschen besser sein als vorher. Dann ist es schon besser, dann darf es schon verändert werden.*

<sup>114</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Am Anfang tendierst du extrem stark dazu Probleme vorweg zu nehmen. Wir haben gesagt, das machen wir jetzt bewusst nicht so. Wir schauen, und wenn es dann eben irgendwie Störungen gibt, dann tacklen wir sie genau mit dem, was nötig ist. [...] Du merkst immer, wenn du gewisse Dinge zulässt, die Entscheidung, die ist immer besser, als du vorher dachtest, weil du nie alle Informationen hast.*

<sup>115</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Das ist auch immer eine Kritik, an Holacracy, dass dann jemand sagt: Was ist dann, wenn der Lehrling einen Aston Martin kauft? [...] Ja, darf dann jeder jetzt einfach machen, was er will? Dann musst du wieder sagen: Moment schnell, Menschenbild? Gesunder Menschenverstand? Wieso genau soll das jemand machen?*

<sup>116</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Zum Beispiel, ich kann etwas verändern, wenn es keinen Schaden herbeiführt. Das ist ein kleiner Satz, aber der ist ein Major Change! Das ist auch das VUCA-Modell, [...] wenn du das anschaust, dann siehst du eigentlich auch, dass halt diese Zyklen kürzer werden [...]. Und darum glaube ich auch, braucht es auch agiler Formen, wie man auf Dinge zugeht, oder?*



*“And you go into self-reflection whenever you realise it’s not going smoothly. Or when something is holding you back: what’s holding me back? Why does it hold me back? [...] And the system really isn’t for you, if you’re not up for continuous self-development. Because the system itself is constantly evolving. Because we’re not really setting goals, we say constant change is the goal” (Blum / 0:29:08)<sup>117</sup>.*

## Motivation

### Drivers / Aha-moments

**Well-designed, lethargic organisation:** before the switch to Holacracy, the company was organised extremely well, yet not able to react quickly enough to changing needs. Consequently, agility was chosen as an approach to deal with the complexity of the VUCA world and the constant change it demands.

*“We were extremely well organised. We were ISO certified. We had an intricate system of process that worked really well. But because of that, we became rather lethargic. [...] And we just realised: we have to be more agile on our market. Because the needs change a lot faster. [...] And that’s why we started looking for a new organisation form” (Schlegel / 1:05:25)<sup>118</sup>.*

## Framing

### Frameworks / Literature / Models

**Organisational form:** Holacracy is mentioned 53 times, while Sociocracy 3.0 is mentioned once.

**Personality profiles:** one interviewee refers to the DISC chart, a behavioural analysis profile that allocates different colours to different personality traits.

## Practices

### HR Admin / Legal

**Administrative and legal roles:** the role of HR Administrator is responsible for administrative tasks such as employment contracts or questions from employees in this space. The role of Legal Advisor, again within the HR circle,

<sup>117</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wenn du merkst, etwas läuft nicht ganz so rund, oder es bremst mich mehr bei der Arbeit, dass du nachher eigentlich auch in die Selbstreflexion gehst: Was bremst mich? Warum bremst es mich? [...] Denn wenn du dich nicht eigentlich kontinuierlich weiterentwickelst, dann ist das System falsch für dich. Denn dieses System entwickelt sich kontinuierlich weiter. Wir setzen uns ja nicht Ziele, sondern wir sagen eigentlich dieser stetige Wandel ist das Ziel.*

<sup>118</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir waren extrem gut organisiert. Wir waren ISO-zertifiziert. Wir hatten ein riesiges Prozesswesen, das super funktioniert hat. Aber wir wurden dadurch auch sehr lethargisch. [...] Und wir haben einfach gemerkt: Auf dem Markt müssen wir agiler werden. Weil die Bedürfnisse sich viel schneller verändern. [...] Und deshalb hat man nach einer neuen Organisationsform gesucht.*

mainly looks after questions around employment law. HR services remain centrally organised, because a distributed organisation would not be efficient.

## Salary / Finances

**Salary still a challenging topic:** currently, employees can choose between two different salary models, either a fixed monthly salary or a salary tied to individual targets. Salaries are still a challenging topic, comprising a complex structure that has grown over the years and also includes market influences. To design a more straight-forward model is a long-term goal of the organisation. In the meantime, the organisation takes part in external salary studies and uses internal salary benchmarks and medians. The move to full salary transparency is a delicate discussion as well, as it is tied to data privacy. With the shift to Holacracy, employees could also put in applications to re-evaluate their current salaries to ensure everyone felt like they were paid fairly. Some circles also choose to discuss salary raises openly in teams, while the leader simply supplies information and acts as a facilitator of the process.

**Financial transparency:** Key financial figures are openly accessible, including revenue per circle.

*“There’s a discreet model, and there’s a model where we discuss things together. [...] Where I just act as a referee, so as to speak. [...] I supply some information: what’s the business trend? Because you need to know why there’s a large or small salary sum available. [...] And I also supply six information clusters. For example: how are your billable hours? Have you helped others? Just for a bit of orientation. And then they all kind of give a statement what they’ve done well” (Voggenberger / 0:32:56)<sup>119</sup>.*

## Recruiting / Employer Branding

**Focus on employer branding:** the new work culture is emphasised in the employer branding to attract candidates in a labour market where demand exceeds supply. The company senses a huge interest in the organisation form as well as the community feel and the empowerment that comes with it. Job advertisements are thus worded carefully to transport the company culture.

<sup>119</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Es gibt ein diskretes Modell, und es gibt ein Modell, in dem wir es miteinander diskutieren. [...] Bei dem ich sozusagen nur noch als Schiedsrichter agiert habe. [...] Ich gab die Informationen: Was ist der Geschäftsverlauf? Denn du musst auch wissen, warum es eine grosse oder kleine Lohnsumme gibt. [...] Und ich habe dann noch so sechs Cluster mitgegeben. Also zum Beispiel: Wie verrechenbar warst du? Wie viel hast du vielleicht sonst für die Leute gute Dinge gemacht? Einfach, damit man sich so ein bisschen orientieren kann. Und dann hat eigentlich jeder kurz begründet, was er gut gemacht hat.*

**Focus on cultural fit:** the organisation aims to attract people who are a cultural fit and share the same values. This includes being a team player, intrinsically motivated and comfortable with a highly dynamic environment. Hence, showing initiative and self-reliance are considered vital to thrive in a self-organised setting. To ensure this, interviews are as open and honest as possible and include highlights and lowlights of the role.

**Distributed recruiting roles:** Circle Lead Link (i.e. Leader) sets a budget for hiring needs and then passes on the process to the (Subject Matter Expertise) Recruiter, which is a multi-staffed role with people from different areas of expertise. Hiring decisions are made by the recruiter, with advice from HR. The new recruitment process leads to faster decisions, as the bottleneck of line management is removed. KPIs help to measure recruiting success (e.g. efficiency of process), as recruiting is deemed quite time-consuming.

**Recruiting process:** after the screening of their application, potential candidates receive an online survey about their motivation and interest in this particular role. Application screening and interviews are usually completed by an HR Specialist and a recruiter together. A first interview focuses on the CV and the experience, while the second interview is based around their area of expertise, usually rounded off by an office tour and meeting team members.

*“We want to strengthen our employer brand even more. In order to find the best matching employees. Hence, not the best ones, as such. But the ones that are the best fit for us” (Schlegel / 0:08:48)<sup>120</sup>.*

*“As early as the recruiting stage, we try to find people who will thrive within a self-organised setting. [...] That’s something that is getting increasingly clear, that we really need people who function like that” (Schlegel / 0:54:04)<sup>121</sup>.*

*“That’s a value added: that we’re a lot faster in our HR decisions, in parts. That we can directly collaborate with the subject matter experts. Whereas before, all of it had to be run by the line managers. [...] Well, in the beginning, this takes some time. Because the new decision-makers first of all have to learn how to do just that” (Schlegel / 1:30:23)<sup>122</sup>.*

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<sup>120</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Eben, unsere Arbeitgebermarke wollen wir stärker positionieren. Damit wir einfach auch diese Mitarbeiter finden, die am besten zu uns passen. Eben, nicht die besten. Sondern einfach die, die am besten zu uns passen.*

<sup>121</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Von dem her ist es schon so, dass wir auch versuchen, schon in der Rekrutierung natürlich auch Leute zu finden, die sich in so einer Selbstorganisation wohlfühlen. [...] Und das ist sicher auch ein Thema, bei dem sich immer mehr herauskristallisierte, dass wir Personen brauchen, die auch so funktionieren wollen.*

<sup>122</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Was sicher ein Mehrwert ist: Dass wir jetzt teilweise viel schneller auch Entscheide im HR herbeiführen können. Dass wir direkt mit den Fachleuten eigentlich zusammenarbeiten können. Früher musste das alles immer den Vorgesetzten laufen. [...] Also, das braucht am Anfang ein wenig Zeit. Weil natürlich diese Personen, die plötzlich entscheiden müssen, das auch lernen müssen.*

## On- / Offboarding

**Onboarding key in self-organisation:** the highly structured onboarding process includes an onboarding day (run monthly) and an induction day (every trimester). The onboarding day covers processes and tools, including CI / CD, or the project management system. The induction day is dedicated to the organisation itself, its culture as well as self-reflection.

**Offboarding process:** the organisation emphasises the importance of the offboarding process as a socio-cultural and emotional process. Reasons to leave the organisation are manifold, and may include the lack of traditional management career paths. The structured offboarding process includes an exit interview to gather feedback on the organisation for future learning. The organisation also likes to keep in close contact with its alumni, as many return or recommend the company to colleagues further down the path.

*“We realised that, especially within self-organisation, that the onboarding process is key” (Schlegel / 0:14:17)<sup>123</sup>.*

## Development / Performance

**Specialist careers and role transparency:** the organisation offers specialist careers based on maturity, grouped into job families. Employees may also switch between specialist careers. Role descriptions and competency matrices are openly available to all employees. As a rule of thumb, 80% of a certain level has to be ticked off to carry the corresponding role title or seniority level. To do so, employees hand in a proposal at the annual compensation and promotion process, which is overlooked by two roles to ensure objectivity. Despite initial expectation for the promotion process to lose importance within self-organisation, it is still very much in demand. The external labour market that still largely depends on traditional career concepts and labels might be a possible explanation for its sustained popularity.

**Subject Guardians dedicated to personal development:** the newly established role of Subject Guardian is responsible for the promotion process, the training budgets and feedback rounds for an allocated number of employees (i.e. 15-20). Acting as a coach for individual employees, the Subject Guardian resembles the former line manager, yet without the hierarchical power. Subject Guardians are also able to assess subject-specific skills.

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<sup>123</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und was wir auch gemerkt haben, gerade in einer solchen Selbstorganisation ist eigentlich der Onboarding-Prozess Key.*

**Development roles in the People Circle:** this circle includes the role of Talent Developer, who looks after the onboarding and induction process and answers questions about specialist careers or trainings. Another role focuses on running preparation classes for a project management certification.

*“That means, power is a part of this system as well. [...] But power isn’t concentrated in a single person. It’s where it makes sense. Which means that power lies within the person who can also make a factual assessment: how good is this person? What’s this person’s journey? What does this person need” (Voggenberger / 0:26:24)<sup>124</sup>?*

## Communication / Feedback

**No formal reviews, but need for critical feedback:** even before Holacracy, there were no formal reviews. After a couple of years into Holacracy, the need arose to incorporate some sort of formalised feedback, especially to normalise critical feedback. First trials with peer feedback have not been fruitful, as they were not embedded in an ongoing dialogue. Currently, the organisation is gathering inspiration from other companies to develop a new approach.

**Strengthening feedback channels:** without line management, there is no clear responsibility for feedback, which has resulted in strengthening both HR roles and other feedback channels (such as role fit meetings or fishbowls). There is an emphasis on immediate and direct feedback, which again is rooted in the strong belief that addressing actual tension is preferable over building a process-heavy organisation that regulates every possible decision.

**Alternative career approach needs translation:** the role-based system within the company needs translation e.g. towards clients to justify different rates for different seniority levels or for competing in labour market that still heavily relies on traditional labels. This issue is likely to intensify over the next years as traditional career paths further disappear.

**Communication as a success factor:** honest, authentic and direct communication is deemed a cornerstone of self-organisation, as there is no line management that may substitute direct communication, asking for help or taking over decision-making across individuals and teams. Whereas more proactive people might thrive immediately within self-organisation, others might need more support in learning how to communicate openly or make their own decisions. At the same time, employees also have more direct client

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<sup>124</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Das heisst, auch in diesem System hast du irgendwo Macht. [...] Aber sie ist nicht mehr irgendwie auf einer Person drauf. Und sie ist dort, wo sie Sinn macht. Nämlich bei dieser Person, die fachlich beurteilen kann: Ist die Person gut? Wo steht sie? Was braucht sie?*

interaction due to the lack of line management. Therefore, self-organisation actually seems to demand more support mechanisms to ensure employees learn how to be their own advocates in a highly autonomous environment.

*“After about a year and a half, two years, the need for receiving feedback resurged, the need to get assessed. To also receive critical feedback. In order to grow. The question of course was: who is going to do that, in the future? Because there was no line management anymore” (Schlegel / 0:59:30)<sup>125</sup>.*

*“And this aha moment. [...] that you still need certain things. For example, we realised that, with our framework, as an extremely proactive person, you have an enormous amount of autonomy. But on the other hand, there are people who are really struggling with this very behaviour” (Voggenberger / 0:39:41)<sup>126</sup>.*

*“For example, there’s a proverb that goes something like this: you can drag a horse to the water, but you can’t force it to drink. Right? And that’s something that people have to learn as well. [...] People have to come up to you and say: I need help” (Voggenberger / 0:42:41)<sup>127</sup>.*

*“For example, entering billable hours. If a single person doesn’t enter the billable hours, then you don’t have to tell off the remaining 15 people, but you talk individually to that person. [...] You always have to look at the individual case and the individual issue” (Voggenberger / 1:06:34)<sup>128</sup>.*

*“Appreciation is really important, I think. That you tell people they’re important for us. That they feel that they’re really a part of this organisation and not simply a number. But a real part of it” (Blum / 0:12:28)<sup>129</sup>.*

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<sup>125</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *So nach eineinhalb, zwei Jahren, ist dann eigentlich der Wunsch wieder aufgekommen Feedback zu bekommen, sich auch mal beurteilen lassen zu können. Auch kritisches Feedback. Dass man sich auch weiterentwickeln kann. Dann stand die Frage im Raum: Ja, wer kann denn das machen, zukünftig? Weil es ja keinen Chef mehr gibt.*

<sup>126</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Oder eben auch Aha-Effekt. [...] dass es eben trotzdem gewisse Dinge braucht. Jetzt zum Beispiel, das haben wir jetzt eben gesehen, mit diesem Modell, wenn du extrem proaktiv bist, kannst du dir extrem viele Freiheiten schaffen. Es gibt dann aber auch Leute, die kriegen das nicht auf die Reihe, die schaffen das nicht.*

<sup>127</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und, das ist zum Beispiel ein Schritt, bei dem du sagen musst, es gibt so ein Sprichwort, wie heisst das, eben: Du kannst den Gaul zum Wasser ziehen, aber trinken muss er selber. Oder? Und das ist wie ein wenig etwas, was die Leute lernen müssen. [...] Leute müssen dann auch kommen und sagen: Hey, ich brauche Hilfe.*

<sup>128</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben zum Beispiel immer das Thema beim Buchen. Und wenn jetzt jemand seine Leistungen nicht bucht, dann musst du es nicht den anderen 15 sagen, dann musst du halt mit diesem einen sprechen. [...] Aber eben, da musst du eigentlich immer punktuell eigentlich schauen, wo das Problem liegt.*

<sup>129</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Ich denke, ganz wichtig ist Wertschätzung. Dass du den Leuten sagst, wie wichtig sie für uns sind. Dass sie das spüren, dass sie wirklich ein Part dieser Firma sind, und nicht einfach eine Nummer. Sondern ein wichtiger Part.*

**Organisational structure**

**Holacracy as a framework for self-organisation:** the company has chosen Holacracy as a framework to implement self-organisation. The main driver was to create more space for individuals to take over responsibility and innovate. Human aspects, however, have to be deliberately added to Holacracy, as it barely considers them. At the core of Holacracy is an extreme fluidity, that makes reorganisations obsolete, as the organisation constantly reshapes according to different needs. It does so by creating or disestablishing circles and roles, each with their purpose and accountabilities, respectively. Only having started out a couple of years ago, the organisation is described as still having a relatively low level of maturity of self-organisation.

**Role-based approach with full transparency:** when Holacracy was established, the initial set of roles was created by re-bundling all existing tasks in a way that was not linked to individual people, but to the subject matter. Every role is defined by a purpose and accountabilities, setting clear expectations. Employees have different roles and therefore different levels of power associated with each role. As an example, a single person might simultaneously hold the roles of HR Recruiter, HR Business Partner and HR Communicator. Employees have an online profile listing all their current roles, including their purpose and accountabilities.

**Job-crafting:** the role-based approach enables employees to take on roles according to strengths and interests, as well as to create new roles or alter existing ones. Accordingly, they can also let go of roles that impede their development.

**HR roles:** the HR Circle includes roles that are designed to look after the whole employee lifecycle. Roles that are staffed by employees without a previous HR background, such as the (Subject Matter Expertise) Recruiter, are also in this circle. HR roles are often staffed with a geographical focus, as strong personal relationships are deemed beneficial for the close collaboration needed. To gather all roles in one circle minimises coordination and alignment efforts.

**Subject Guardian:** As a recently added role within the HR circle, Subject Guardians look after 15-20 people in their own area of expertise (i.e. job family). The creation of this role is an answer to the lack of line managers as sparring partners for personal development. Subject Guardians not only need to be experts in their field, but also have a passion for developing people. Notably, only about a third of current role holders are former line managers.



*“Human aspects are largely omitted by Holacracy as a framework. They simply don’t exist. You have to add that content deliberately” (Schlegel / 1:04:00)<sup>130</sup>.*

*“I really think that we’ll have new people popping up and taking leads. [...] Because the new system allows them to show their strengths a lot more” (Schlegel / 1:09:19)<sup>131</sup>.*

*“To illustrate this, we always say: take a person, flip it upside-down, shake it. All the different tasks will fall out. And then you take these tasks and bundle them differently. [...] And everyone can exercise power, right? Because you receive the power connected to your role” (Voggenberger / 0:10:12)<sup>132</sup>.*

*“We debated for quite some time: what do we use for our alignment? Customers? Verticals? Technologies? And there would always be pros and cons. And in theory, you could be doing a reorganisation every year. [...] Whereas the organisation we have now allows us to have customer circles, for example. [...] But you can also disestablish them if you don’t need them anymore. [...] They only exist as long as they are needed. In whatever way they are needed” (Voggenberger / 0:13:34)<sup>133</sup>.*

*“It gave me the opportunity to adopt tasks that were completely out of my reach before, because they might have been organised completely differently. Whereas now I can just say: I’m interested in that” (Blum / 0:31:54)<sup>134</sup>.*

## **Self-concept of HR / People management**

**Dedicated to human aspects within self-organisation:** the organisation aspires to emphasise meaningful relationships and the community feel of the workplace, putting people centre-stage. However, how individuals can receive the support they need within self-organisation and how to balance out the needs of both people and the company are ongoing discussions. HR is believed to play a vital part in this endeavour. As such, it acts as a driver for all

<sup>130</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Also das Thema Mensch ist im Rahmen von Holacracy sicher ein Thema, das einfach nicht existiert. Das man wie selber mit Inhalt befüllen muss.*

<sup>131</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Was ich glaube ist, dass sich ganz neue Personen in den Vordergrund werden stellen können. [...] Weil sie vielleicht auch einfach aufgrund des Systems jetzt ihre Fähigkeiten stärker ausleben können.*

<sup>132</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben immer das Beispiel gesagt: Du nimmst die Person, du kehrst sie um, du schüttelst sie, und dann fallen alle Aufgaben raus. Und dann bündelst du die neu. [...] Jeder kann eigentlich Macht haben, und ausüben, oder? Weil du eigentlich immer die Macht bekommst, die mit deiner Rolle zusammenhängt.*

<sup>133</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Wir haben uns recht lange überlegt: Nach was richten wir uns eigentlich uns? Nach Kunden? Oder richten wir uns irgendwie nach Verticals aus? Oder richten wir uns einfach nach Technologien aus? Und es gab eigentlich immer verschiedene Gründe dafür und dagegen. Und dann hättest du jedes Jahr theoretisch eine neue Reorganisation machen können. [...] Und die Organisation, die wir jetzt haben, die lässt eben zu, dass wir zum Beispiel Kundenkreise haben. [...] Aber du kannst das auch wieder auflösen, wenn du das nicht mehr brauchst. [...] Das besteht eigentlich immer so lange, wie man es in diesem Sinne gebraucht wird. In der Ausprägung, wie es gebraucht wird*

<sup>134</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Es hat mir die Möglichkeit gegeben, Dinge zu übernehmen, die vorher gar nicht denkbar gewesen wären, weil sie einfach irgendwo ganz anders angehängt waren. Bei denen ich aber jetzt sagen konnte: Doch, mich interessiert das.*



people aspects, ranging from employer branding to continuous learning. HR is viewed as a driver of organisational development, that can act as a sensor for what the company needs to be future-proof. The function as a general point of contact has become even more important with the disestablishment of line management, and hence abandoning the traditional HR Business Partner model. As such, HR role holders act as coaches to a much larger clientele.

**Role-based approach to HR:** just like the rest of the organisation, HR tasks are bundled up in different roles. As such, individuals can focus on tasks they are truly interested in and good at. Because individuals have more than one role, it allows employees without a background in HR to hold people-related roles (e.g. Subject Matter Expertise Recruiter or Subject Guardian) alongside more technical roles. The bundling of all these roles in the HR circle is reported to speed up decision-making and foster alignment. Current HR roles include: HR Recruiter, HR Business Partner, HR Administrator, HR Marketing Manager, HR Communication, HR Analyst, Subject Matter Expertise Recruiter, Discount Detector, Legal Advisor, Subject Guardian.

*“Of course, we see HR as a general point of contact. But we haven’t fully come to terms with our new role yet, within the organisational framework. You see, traditionally, HR would act as a Business Partner. Yet, as we no longer have a line management, the role of being a general port of call is becoming a lot more important” (Schlegel / 0:08:39)<sup>135</sup>.*

*“What is HR about? Well, it starts with continuing to support Unic and the organisational development. Looking after: what does Unic need to be ready for the future” (Schlegel / 0:10:48)<sup>136</sup>?*

*“It’s definitely the case that we have a few more topics with HR now. However, this might also have to do with the fact that were always very close to the individual employee, even before Holacracy” (Schlegel / 0:56:13)<sup>137</sup>.*

*“With Holacracy, it for sure is an ongoing topic of adding human processes to the system. But I also think that we’ll have a lot more best practices around*

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<sup>135</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Und natürlich als HR sehen wir uns schon auch als Anlaufstelle. Im Rahmen dieser neuen Organisationsform ist das auch ein Thema, das wir Stand heute noch nicht final geklärt haben. Also, klassischerweise ist HR ja eigentlich als Business Partner eine Anlaufstelle, aber durch den Wegfall der Vorgesetzten tritt das natürlich noch viel stärker in den Vordergrund.*

<sup>136</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Was verstehen wir darunter, was HR tut? Eben, das startet eigentlich damit, dass wir auch Unic selber in der Organisationsentwicklung weiterhin unterstützen. Auch schauen: Was braucht überhaupt Unic, dass sie für die Zukunft aufgestellt ist?*

<sup>137</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Das ist sicher so, dass vielleicht ein paar Themen mehr jetzt bei HR aufschlagen. Aber das hat vermutlich auch damit zu tun, dass wir auch schon vor Holacracy sehr nahe bei den einzelnen Mitarbeitenden waren.*

*how to implement this, as soon as there's a few more firms doing it"*  
(Voggenberger / 0:55:34)<sup>138</sup>.

*"Another thing I find important: it's still a people business" (Voggenberger / 1:02:25)<sup>139</sup>.*

*"I feel like, as a society, we are constantly changing. [...] And can't make any forecasts. But I think, the way we are set up now, with Holacracy, we are in a position to react to change. To react to change quickly. To try things. And therefore we can already offer HR 2.0, or maybe even 3.0" (Blum / 0:39:49)<sup>140</sup>.*

### Decision-making capacity

**Power is defined by roles, not people:** contrary to common belief, self-organisation is not free of hierarchy or power, but rather described as a system that distributes power differently, by linking it to roles. As individuals hold different roles, they also have different realms of power and decision-making capacity for different roles.

**Making decisions within your roles:** Self-organisation relies on individuals making their own decisions. To make informed decisions, they are encouraged to ask for advice and include different points of views. This called for a behavioural shift, especially for former line managers, as they are only allowed to address tensions directly affecting their own roles.

**Consensus is not the goal:** the organisation operations on the axiom of causing no harm. Role holders can make their own decisions, launch experiments and make improvements as long as they do not mean any harm to the organisation. To reach consensus, on the other hand, is not the goal, as this would likely lead to inefficiency and delay decision-making.

*"At the very start, you need a bit of time. Because the new decision-makers have to learn how to do it. And that's a process, you can't just flick a switch"*  
(Schlegel / 1:30:23)<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>138</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ich denke eben bei Holacracy ist sicher das Thema, dass man sich um diese menschlichen Prozesse einfach noch ein bisschen dazunehmen muss. Dort glaube ich aber auch, wenn das ein paar Firmen machen, dann wird es auch Best Practice geben, wie man das implementieren kann.*

<sup>139</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Und das andere, was ich auch wichtig finde: Es ist halt nach wie vor immer noch ein People Business.*

<sup>140</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Ich habe das Gefühl, wir sind als Gesellschaft permanent im Wandel. [...] Da will ich mir nicht anmassen, da irgendwelche Ziele oder Prognosen zu setzen. Ich denke, so wie wir jetzt aufgestellt sind mit Holacracy haben wir die besten Voraussetzungen, dass wir eben auf Veränderungen reagieren können. Schnell reagieren können. Dass wir Dinge auch ausprobieren können. Und dementsprechend auch das HR 2.0, oder vielleicht schon 3.0, auch bieten können.*

<sup>141</sup> Author's own translation. Original citation: *Also, das braucht am Anfang auch ein wenig Zeit. Weil natürlich diese Personen, die plötzlich entscheiden müssen, das auch lernen müssen. Das ist ja auch so ein Prozess, bei dem man nicht einfach so per se den Schalter umlegen kann.*

*“What people had to learn initially, especially the alpha leaders: if it’s not a part of your role, you can’t say anything. [...] And funnily enough, former line managers struggled the most with this” (Voggenberger / 1:13:04)<sup>142</sup>.*

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<sup>142</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Was die Leute am Anfang, vor allem die Alphetierchen, lernen mussten, ist: Wenn du die Rolle nicht hast, darfst du nichts sagen. [...] Und das ist wirklich noch lustig, das ist so das, womit typischerweise die Ex-Führungskräfte am meisten Mühe hatten damit.*

## 5. Cross-case analysis

The previous chapter 4 provided individual summaries for each of the ten organisations studied, creating a rich description of their distinct realities. The present chapter 5, as the second results chapter, provides a further analysis across all organisations. In doing so, it condenses the data and provides an overview over themes and topics relevant to this emerging practice. This intermediary step prepares the data for the synthesis in the following chapter 6.

While the single-case summaries replicated the structure of the coding system for analysing the interview data, the structure used for the overall analysis differs. The structure of the cross-case summary reflects both crossovers in coded passages as well as their content. For example, many interviewees mentioned building relationships as a crucial element of creating a network organisation where knowledge and experience is shared openly. Accordingly, the codes *network / relationship* and *learning organisation* were merged at this stage, because they were not only allocated frequently to the same transcript passages, but also overlapped in content. This process was explained closer as a part of the methodology chapter, more precisely in section 3.2.1, and was illustrated by Table 18.

The cross-case summary is divided in four themes. Firstly, **(1) core principles** prepare the ground for all following decisions regarding practices or organisational structure. Even though organisations may differ slightly on what they pay particular attention to at the time, their values and principles are remarkably similar. A people-centric mindset and a holistic view on people allow them to believe in empowerment and autonomy as a way of incorporating learning and change. Creating an environment that embeds these principles then becomes a priority, which is adamantly clear in their **(2) concepts for HR and people management**. This segment not only includes traditional HR work, but also integrates servant leadership as a crucial enabler of establishing practices around the chosen principles. The next segment then showcases **(3) examples of embedding principles in practice**, bringing the axiom of constant change while staying true to your principles to life: for instance, how alternative career concepts have to balance individual and collective development, or why making open communication a habit is an essential yet challenging endeavour. The closing segment then illuminates the **(4) enabling organisational structure** around these practices. While constant change makes the definition of *best practice* impossible, there are three distinguishable overarching approaches to organising HR work in the organisations studied. Defining the whole organisation as a dynamic entity seems to be a crucial prerequisite, that allows to embrace role-based approaches and self-organisation.

Table 19 below gives an overview over the headings and subheadings chosen to structure the condensed analysis of these four themes, which will constitute the remainder of this chapter.

Table 19 Overview of cross-case analysis

Core principles	
Purpose, values and principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Values and purpose as overarching elements</li> <li>– People-centric approach as a common narrative</li> <li>– A holistic view on capable people</li> <li>– Empowerment and autonomy as cornerstones of delivering value</li> <li>– Creating an environment for empowering people</li> </ul>
Learning organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Relationship-building as a framework condition</li> <li>– View on organisations as a living, evolving organism</li> <li>– Incorporating change as a constant</li> <li>– Learning and error culture as enablers of continuous improvement</li> <li>– Building organisations around individual and collective learning</li> </ul>
Approach to HRM and people management	
Concept of HR and people management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Seamless integration of administrative tasks</li> <li>– A deliberately <i>different</i> approach to HR</li> <li>– Consensus about caring for people as a purpose</li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Distributed leadership as a sense of ownership</li> <li>– Servant leadership ensures a supportive and inspirational environment</li> <li>– Coaches instead of managers</li> <li>– Leading by example and through self-reflection</li> </ul>
Examples of embedding principles in practices	
Employer branding and talent acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Recruiting process and the (multiple) parties involved</li> <li>– Central role of employer branding</li> <li>– Cultural fit over technical fit</li> <li>– (Soft-skill) criteria for candidates</li> <li>– Being suited to the way of working</li> <li>– Onboarding as a cultural head-start</li> <li>– Acknowledging the importance of the offboarding process</li> <li>– References for team dynamics</li> </ul>
Professional development and career definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Alternative definition of career and its challenges</li> <li>– Balancing individual and collective development</li> <li>– Self-driven and continuous development</li> <li>– Support structure around individual learning</li> <li>– No formal (performance) reviews</li> <li>– Formal (performance) reviews as conversation starters</li> <li>– Communication culture: both a success factor and a challenge</li> <li>– Direct, immediate and ongoing feedback</li> <li>– References for personality traits and communication</li> </ul>
Enabling organisational structure	
Organising HR work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Different enabling structures instead of <i>best practice</i></li> <li>– <i>Approach 1</i>: hybrid structure with clear accountability</li> <li>– <i>Approach 2</i>: distributed and role-based approach</li> <li>– <i>Approach 3</i>: Network of coaches and servant leaders</li> </ul>
Organisational model and structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Avoiding bureaucracy and silo-building</li> <li>– Organisation as a dynamic entity</li> <li>– Role-based approach across the organisation</li> <li>– Self-organisation and delegated authority</li> <li>– Maximising decision-making capability</li> <li>– References for self-organisation</li> </ul>

## 5.1. Core principles

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### Purpose, values and principles

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#### Values and purpose as overarching elements

All ten organisations agree on the importance of values and that they have to be brought to life by **embedding values into practices**. By aligning values and practices, they dictate how the organisations operate on an every-day-basis.

**Unic** describes this process as verbalising implicit attitudes about what the organisation deems important in everyday interaction. In a similar effort, and to avoid different interpretation, **Boost** includes descriptions of behaviours linked to each of their core values.

A **strong shared understanding** seems to be a vital element in guiding the organisation. This especially seems to be the case for organisations who rely heavily on self-organisation. **Snapper**, for instance, seeks to create a shared understanding of the *raison d'être* on an individual, team and organisational level – and whether individual skills are optimally applied to help reach the customers' goals. Similarly, **Ströer** stresses the importance of staying focussed on both customer needs and the purpose of the organisation, in order to prevent getting caught up in details. **Liip** also emphasises that purpose always comes before profit, highlighting its priorities and its use of a clear purpose as a compass for the organisation.

Another common thread is the **replacement of vision or mission statement with purpose, values or principles**. The former is thought to be rather disconnected from everyday practice, thus not making enough of an impact. **Humankind**, for example, describes that its purpose acts as an overall driver for all decisions and actions, from internal practices to external consulting work. For **Unic**, having an overarching purpose is particularly crucial as a tool for aligning an organisation with distributed authority. **Redvespa** and **Cerebral** **Fix** likewise state that they use core values in their decision-making, as a way to be more proactive in making decisions and foster overall alignment. According to **Liip**, core values also help to guide through change. As such, it is important that values are constantly addressed in everyday interaction, to both make them less abstract and encourage individuals to hold each other accountable to them.

#### People-centric approach as a common narrative

All ten organisation agree that people have to be centre-stage. There are several strings of explanation. **Liip** and **Redvespa**, representing one view, explain *care* as a main driver for creating their companies. They strive **to create**

**businesses that serve the people**, and not vice-versa. In this case, *people* may even transcend company boundaries and include clients and the wider community. At **Cerebral Fix**, too, the vision of creating lasting experiences not only applies to game development, but includes its own employee experience. **Liip** and **Ergon** emphasise the interconnection between happy employees, happy clients and happy companies, while highlighting that it starts with focusing on people. They argue that happy employees deliver better results for clients, through a higher degree of collaboration and commitment. **Snapper** agrees that creating an environment where people collaborate naturally and can communicate openly directly leads to better outcomes. **Dot** also stresses that their employees are their only source of value creation. These companies chose their path consciously and proudly, even seeing themselves as avant-garde organisations: Providing proof that putting people at the forefront also creates a profitable business.

#### A holistic view on capable people

**Describing people as whole** is a common thread among these organisations. **Humankind** and **Unic** both stress that people should be allowed to be their authentic selves at work, which includes embracing one's emotions and intuition as well as being vulnerable. **Liip** and **Cerebral Fix** agree, and add that people's roles (e.g. priorities, skills, personal situation) might change over time, and that workplaces have to allow for that. **Ströer** further emphasises that people are expected to bring everything to a role, while **Snapper** adds that people are more than the sum of their parts. As such, they bring a lot more to the organisation than just their technical skills.

While focusing on different aspects, all organisations agree on the baseline of people **having good intentions and doing the best they can** within given circumstances. Tapping into that, **Dot** points out that if people are not performing their best, then the system they are in might be to blame. For the same reason, **Humankind** underlines the importance of not judging people too quickly. **Boost**, **Redvespa** and **Unic** emphasise people's talent, passion and resourcefulness, with the latter being described as having the answers within yourself and being able to change. By implication, this means the company is responsible for supporting people in their ongoing transformation and allowing them to connect. **Cerebral Fix** explains this constant transformation with people's striving for mastery, purpose and autonomy. **Liip** adopts a similar stance and draws on recent motivational theory when explaining that monetary incentives or status have been replaced with freedom as a main driver. Because of their ability to change, **Snapper** highlights that people cannot be hired to fill a specific static skills gap, as they are an inevitably dynamic entity.

People's ability to change is largely explained by their **ability to be self-aware and self-reflective**. **Unic** calls these innate human skills that might only have been dormant (e.g. in a highly regulated environment). Within the context of self-organisation, being pro-active, showing initiative and learning from challenges are reported to become increasingly important skills. It is therefore in the company's interest to help people (re-)discover these skills and unlearn other behaviour if necessary. **Ströer** further defines pro-activeness as having a sense of openness and curiosity, which it attests all people.

#### Empowerment and autonomy as cornerstones of delivering value

Proceeding on the assumption that people are resourceful and whole, value can be delivered based on self-organisation and delegated authority. Against this backdrop, empowerment emerges as a strong recurrent theme across all organisations – however varied their chosen tools of empowerment may be. **Humankind** centres its own employee experience around the concept of removing barriers that prevent employees to be their best selves. It does so by a high-trust culture with autonomous, flexible work arrangements, shared power and decision-making capacity and leaders who act as coaches. **Ergon** describes its organisation as **being built around the principle of empowered, self-reliant and committed individuals** who seek autonomy and variety, while avoiding a process-heavy environment. **Snapper** agrees that bureaucracy poses a threat to the freedom and autonomy that individuals need to fulfil their purpose. As a result, every role is endowed with its own realm of autonomy, where individuals are empowered and trusted to make their own decisions. Distributed decision-making is balanced out with clear visibility of goals and progress. **Unic** also believes in delegated authority to empower its people and uses a similar role-based approach. In consequence, individuals are able to take ownership of topics they are interested in. By applying their strengths, they accelerate change and innovation through removing decision-making bottlenecks and boosting intrinsic motivation. **Cerebral Fix** is convinced that employees, especially those who identify with so-called millennial values, want to have a voice and develop their full potential. However, this might pose a substantial cultural and behavioural shift for many employees, who may be used to being micro-managed or might not be comfortable with self-directed learning or embracing their vulnerability. In acknowledgment of that, the company uses the framework of delegated authority to ensure everyone can contribute, while reinforcing individual autonomy over time. This follows the maxim that empowering employees directly translates into financial success. **Redvespa** goes even further and describes empowering people as its sole founding purpose. Still today, its overarching purpose is to support people in finding their passions and unleashing their potential.



When summarising their guiding principles, both **Cerebral Fix** and **Boost** refer to **Manaakitanga, a concept from Māori culture**. Manaakitanga loosely translates to *raising others up*, in the sense of making people feel welcome, nurture relationships and creating a safe environment for them to be successful. It also includes being respectful to yourself and others, taking pride in what you do and aspiring to be better than yesterday. Other organisations, such as **Humankind**, also describe being welcoming and supporting as cornerstones of their identity.

#### Creating an environment for empowering people

Trust is named a pre-condition to empowering people throughout. In line with their view on people as capable and whole, **Liip** explains that it commits to treating people as trustworthy adults, renouncing any attempts to patronise or micro-manage them. For this reason, *trust over control* is one of their guiding principles – evident, for example, in their effort to minimise policies and rules. **Dot** pronounces trust the foundation of all collaboration, whereas **Humankind** calls people supportive, trustworthy and reliable at heart. Hence, trust does not have to be earned, but is a given. **Ergon**, **Snapper** and **Ströer** agree on the fact that **organisations must operate on a baseline of trust**. This also means that people need to be allowed to make their own mistakes.

Several companies mention pragmatism as another foundational principle. **Unic** defines **pragmatism as a focus on reality**, by solving actual tensions instead of discussing fictional problems and using short-term strategies. **Ströer** emphasises the need to have conversations rooted in reality. **Cerebral Fix** further stresses the maxim of not taking yourself too seriously as an organisation, and putting what you do as a company in perspective.

The importance of transparency is mentioned by all organisations, and especially emphasised among organisations leaning heavily towards self-organisation. **Snapper** even calls it a pre-requisite to delegated authority. For most organisations, transparency includes financial transparency, with many organisations granting their employees access to all financial data. Many organisations even extend this to full salary transparency, or have plans to do so in the future. For **Ergon**, **Liip** and **Snapper**, **transparency acts as an enabler for autonomy** and decentralisation. They argue that people can only truly take over responsibility and make informed and sensible decisions (i.e. in line with the organisation's interests) if they have access to all relevant information. **Boost** expands the idea of transparency to being explicit and transparent in everything you do, both as an individual and a collective. In this spirit, **Ströer** adds that all conversations across the organisation should be open per default,

in order for people to get actively involved in topics they care about and want to contribute to.

**Heterogeneity and diversity** seem to be other major enabling factors in these organisations. According to **Ergon** and **Ströer**, while individuals remain centre stage, they are simultaneously seen as components of teams. Their individual skills, qualities and personality traits are always assessed by what they can contribute to a certain team. These organisations are convinced that a wide range of complementary skills is the key to high-performing teams. **Snapper** explains the success of diverse teams by a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds that allow the team to solve complex problems by using different approaches. In this regard, **Boost** underlines the importance of balancing out genders. **Dot** even goes one step further and calls its diversity of skills and perspective the key for creativity and innovation, and hence its own USP.

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#### Learning organisation

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##### Relationship-building as a framework condition

All organisations agree on the importance of relationship-building. **Ströer**, **Snapper** and **Redvespa** label **building personal, meaningful relationships and connectedness a basic social need**, thus contributing to employee wellbeing. **Boost** and **Unic** describe that people have a yearning to be part of a community and naturally seek collaboration. Strong relationships are deemed the cornerstone to any successful collaboration, especially in highly autonomous settings, as for example stressed by **Liip**. **Ergon** explains the prominence of relationship-building with teams being the main vessel for delivering work. A profound understanding of one another is therefore paramount. Consequently, investing in relationship-building is a priority for many. **Boost** and **Humankind** stress that building relationship is the main focus of the onboarding process, aimed at boosting employee flexibility and removing barriers to have conversations across the organisation later on.

**Humankind** mentions collaboration and sharing knowledge in its core values. **Dot** calls direct collaboration a catalyst for both trusting relationships and creativity, and calls it a key to maintaining a strong culture. Alongside their consensus about people's inclination to collaborate, they also emphasise the **importance on fostering collaboration and networking**. Despite different view on whether teams should be stable or flexible, **Ergon** and **Snapper** agree that collaboration is the only way their complex projects can be delivered successfully, as they depend on a combination of skills and perspectives.

For several organisations, networking expands beyond their own organisation, making **clients a part of the collective**. **Boost**, for example, mentions that it involves clients in its own agile transformation, following the maxim of helping clients to be successful – which involves adopting agile ways of working.

#### View on organisations as a living, evolving organism

**Snapper** compares itself to an organ, an ever-changing entity in a highly complex environment. This narrative of the **organisation as a living organism** is present in many narratives, particularly by organisations with a high degree of maturity in self-organisation and decentralisation. **Liip** and **Unic**, for instance, explain that its fluid structure allows them to continuously recalibrate their organisation to changing needs, while balancing alignment and autonomy. **Unic** stresses that organisations go through different stages of maturity in their agile transformation and that the time needed for learning cannot be underestimated. **Dot** compares organisations to complex and dynamic systems that will never reach perfection in their constant adaption cycles.

#### Incorporating change as a constant

All ten organisations mention the **maxim of continuous improvement** as a basic organisational principle. **Liip** compares continuous improvement to a constant debate between efficiency and effectiveness, and a preference for practice over theory. For **Snapper**, continuous improvement is enabled by genuinely delegating authority and sharing ownership, which in turn requires continuous learning from individuals. **Ergon** agrees and adds curiosity, the willingness to take risks and making future-oriented decisions to the list. Being innovative and cutting-edge are drivers for **Humankind** and **Ströer**, pushing them to constantly question the status quo. The ability to question everything and investigate why something makes you uncomfortable is considered the essence of being agile. To never rest on your laurels and incorporate change as a constant is also stressed by **Redvespa**, particularly for the ongoing cultural transformation in a growing organisation.

#### Learning and error culture as enablers of continuous improvement

There also seems to be a consensus around how to implement continuous improvement. **CerebralFix** explains continuous improvement as having a bold goal, yet acknowledging that merely the next step towards that goal may be visible. Consequently, moving forward means a constant loop of inspection and adaption. This requires a **safe-to-fail environment where running small experiments** are used to identify risks and opportunities as early as possible by using small, iterative changes, as **Boost** describes it. **Unic** and **Snapper** again stress the importance of learning-by-doing and experimenting as a way to gain insights into current needs and for self-discovery.

For **Snapper** and **Ströer**, it is of utmost importance to avoid rulebook approaches in an endeavour of continuous self-reflection. In this context, failure is deemed an inherent part of the process. **Dot** and **Liip** stress the importance of people having to make their own experiences, as learning is described as a result of making mistakes. **Humankind** and **Redvespa** add the importance of **establishing an error culture** characterised by vulnerability and normalising mistakes as a learning opportunity.

#### Building organisations around individual and collective learning

It is of little surprise that **CerebralFix** calls **maximising learning the core driver for designing the organisation**, manifested in implementing constant learning and sharing loop, due to its strong belief in the power of the collective. At the very heart of it, this includes the ability to unlearn and question old ways. **Boost** is very deliberate in its intent to build an organisation entirely dedicated to learning and personal growth, making learning visible. People are required to take over responsibility both for their own learning and the organisational learning. To ensure organisational cohesion, there is a strong focus on connecting individuals to each other and the organisation's purpose, for example through cross-functional learning sessions. **Dot** invests heavily in collective learning as well. **CerebralFix** emphasises the importance of leading by example and sharing knowledge openly. **Ergon** calls this mechanism balancing delegated authority and shared learning, where autonomous teams are expected to share their insights with the whole organisation.

## 5.2. Approach to HRM and people management

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### Concept for HR and people management

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#### Seamless integration of administrative tasks

If mentioning administrative tasks at all, organisations such as **Redvespa**, **Snapper** or **Ströer** describe it as a hygiene function. This **complete integration of administrative work into the system** is also reflected in the fact that HR services at **Unic** include some of the very few centrally organised roles – in order to ensure efficiency. **Liip** stresses the importance of stream-lining, automatising and digitising all administrative processes, and overhauls its services for user-friendliness on a regular basis. Administrative processes are also challenged in regard to the value they add to the organisation. At **Dot**, administrative tasks (including work contracts or insurances registration) are shared among all employees, which again emphasises the importance of minimising these tasks and making them as efficiently as possible.

#### A deliberately different approach to HRM

When **CerebralFix** and **Humankind** underline that their companies aspire to have a *different* approach to HRM, they express what many organisations imply. While portraying traditional HRM as overly focused on compliance, their chosen approach is described as focussing consistently on people, with a holistic perspective. HRM, with that in mind, becomes responsible for ensuring an environment where people can collaborate and grow. This is thought to directly lead to better business outcomes. **Liip** is even more explicit in questioning the value of traditional HR in agile organisations, or indeed any modern work environment. Compliance should be reduced to a bare minimum of fulfilling basic legal duties. Instead, **HR should find new ways of truly adding value**, serving all employees instead of merely advising line management. This shift is reflected in the headcount, with reducing administrative roles and simultaneously upstaffing HR Specialist roles. **Redvespa** agrees that in order to help them unleash their potential, HR role holders need to have strong personal relationships with all employees. **Boost** adds that in line with this new understanding of HR, embedding values and principles into practices becomes crucial in enabling the desired workplace culture.

#### Consensus about caring for people as a purpose

All organisations share a common understanding of the main purpose of HR work, namely **putting people and their development centre-stage**. **Boost** describes this as supporting people through seeing and nurturing their talents and allowing them to grow as individuals. Similarly, supporting people and watching them develop is described as the most rewarding thing for HR role

holders at **Snapper**. While **Unic** admits that it is still learning how to best balance individual and organisational needs in self-organisation, it is convinced that HRM plays a crucial part in the solution. With the disestablishment of line management and HR business partners, consequently, HR work shifts much closer to the individual. **Liip** acknowledges that in the early days of self-organisation, it questioned the viability of dedicated HR Specialist roles. However, it soon realised the power of their multiplier effect, spreading people skills across the organisation.

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## Leadership

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### Distributed leadership as a sense of ownership

**Liip**, **Ströer** and **Unic** emphasise that traditional line management no longer adds any value to their organisations. However, these organisations also report that it was a slow process of realising that while self-organisation might not need managers, leaders were still very much in demand. They now rely on distributed leadership, where new leaders emerge based on individual strengths and a willingness to take on more responsibility in a certain area – also meaning that leadership is fluid. Concurrently, distributing leadership avoids bottlenecks: the CEO of **Boost** calls himself and his ability to learn the major limiting factor for the company. Distributed leadership also ensures that decision-makers have the subject matter expertise necessary. This might require a dramatic mindset shift from former leaders, who no longer have to step in as trouble shooters, but have to enable and encourage others in making their own decisions. In this context, **leadership and ownership go hand in hand**, with individuals setting expectations around a topic they care about.

**Leadership is deemed inherent to any system.** **Dot** gives the example that without formal leaders, all organisational members automatically take on leadership: for themselves as well as for the system. **CerebralFix** adds that everyone in the organisation has leadership qualities by at least taking ownership for their own tasks.

### Servant leadership ensures a supportive and inspirational environment

**Boost** and **Humankind** add another aspect of leadership, which can be described as servant leadership. While distributing power and authority as much as possible, servant leaders make sure individuals are enabled and supported in their growth and in taking up ownership. **Servant leadership is compared to a one-size-fits-one approach**, and thus has to be tailored to individual needs. Servant leaders may also be responsible for the collaborative setting and tracking of the strategy. This role of driving the vision forward is endorsed by **CerebralFix**, who mentions that many employees still appreciate

having inspirational leaders that at the same time make it explicit that they do not have all answers ready themselves.

#### Coaches instead of managers

Several organisations mention that they **replaced managers with coaches**.

**Boost** and **Snapper** describe these coaches as being on eye-level, helping individuals and teams to grow, without having any formal power or control over them. In that respect, leadership is not measured by direct outcomes, but rather by impact (i.e. what others can achieve because of you). While **Ergon** still has formal team leaders, growing team members is stated as a major part of their role, alongside facilitating decision-making or moderating conflicts.

#### Leading by example and through self-reflection

According to **Dot** and **Boost**, **constant self-reflection** should be a part of any leadership role. This is validated by **Ergon** and **Humankind**, who stress the importance of not judging too quickly and always reflect on your own role in the matter first. Good leadership has a lot to do with asking the right questions and being present.

Being a leader also involves **being a role model for the behaviour you wish to see** across the organisation. According to **Boost**, **CerebralFix**, **Humankind** and **Snapper**, leading by example might entail behaviours such as sharing knowledge instinctively, being vulnerable and service-oriented or ensuring a healthy life-mix (e.g. work sensible work hours yourself).

### 5.3. Examples of embedding principles in practices

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#### Employer branding and talent acquisition

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##### Recruiting process and the (multiple) parties involved

The majority of the organisations choose a **team-driven approach that draws on support from HR roles**. The HR role holder at **Boost** advertises roles, screens incoming resumés and has a quick phone chat with potential candidates. After that, candidates are invited to an assessment, based on their area of expertise. There is a principle to involve as many team members in the hiring process as possible, as they are the ones who need to be able to collaborate with the new employee. At **Ergon**, the leadership team delegation defines hiring needs and search profiles, while HR is responsible for advertising and screening candidates, usually together with team leaders. After a technical assessment by the CTO, candidates are passed on to the teams who make the ultimate hiring decision. Recruiting at **Liip** is done almost entirely by teams, yet with HR Specialist support readily available. As such, HR role holders with their knowhow and expertise act as on-demand coaches rather than bottlenecks. To ensure new employees fit in with the wider culture, everyone at **Ströer** has to agree on new hires. Hence, everyone who is interested is invited to be a part of the recruiting process, even though the actual team takes the lead. Roles are only advertised after a company-wide discussion on which skills are needed. After sending their resumé, potential candidates fill out a brief online test on basic technical ability, depending on the role. Candidates are then invited for an hourly informal chat with the recruiting group (i.e. the HR role holder and two other company members). After that, candidates are invited to spend half a day in with the company, where they meet as many people as possible and get assessed on an actual task.

At **Unic**, the recruiting process is kicked off by a leadership role that sets a budget for a hiring need. After that, the rest of the **process is owned by the role** (Subject Matter Expertise) Recruiter. This multi-staffed role brings the necessary expertise to the table, while speeding up decision-making through removing bottlenecks. Subject Matter Expertise Recruiters are supported by the role HR Specialist, who acts as an advisor and will conduct joint interviews with candidates. Before their first interviews, candidates fill out an online survey about their motivation and interest in the role. The second meeting centres around the candidate's areas of expertise and includes an office tour and meeting potential team members. At **CerebralFix**, it is the CTO who is responsible for recruiting.



The **leadership team drives recruiting** at [Humankind](#), discusses hiring need and completes a skills profile together with the team. Based on the search profile, a recruitment agency (i.e. the sister company) shortlists potential candidates. The first interview takes place with two members of the leadership team, while more team members are included in a second interview.

The recruiting process at [Snapper](#) differs whether the hiring need has been identified as a capability issue (i.e. expertise needed) or a capacity issue (i.e. volume needed). The process of hiring experts is owned by the leadership team, whereas hiring graduates (for a higher capacity) is driven by the product owners and happens in close collaboration with universities. Regardless of the candidate's roles, **hiring decisions are made collectively** by as many organisational members as possible.

An entirely different approach to recruiting can be found at [Dot](#), where **all hiring is opportunity-driven**. Candidates are predominantly found within the consultants' own network and ideally include experiences of collaboration.

#### Central role of employer branding

The company **values are the main element of attracting talents**, which is why it is given such priority at [Humankind](#). For [Unic](#), employer branding ensures viability in a labour market where demand exceeds supply. In this case, this means investing in a new work culture and organisation form that is met with high interest by candidates. The fact that [Dot](#) strives to be a preferred and cutting-edge employer also reflects in a strong emphasis on communication and the curation of the public image. To convey the culture of the organisation and attract the right candidates, [Redvespa](#) is particularly mindful of the language used on the website or in job advertisements.

#### Cultural fit over technical fit

All organisations studied emphasise the importance of cultural fit between the organisation and the candidates and **cultural fit repeatedly ranks higher than technical fit**. Testing for cultural fit happens through asking questions and what is often described as a *collective gut feeling*. [Boost](#) is very protective of its culture and explains that finding the right candidates is the main limiting factor to growth. This includes the maxim that the company has the aspiration to be transformational in employees' lives and therefore seeks people who will profit most from that proposition. Similarly, [Humankind](#) and [Redvespa](#) see the recruiting process as a two-way street where the candidates assess the culture and work environment as well to determine whether they would thrive there.

For **Liip** and **Ströer**, a holistic assessment of the whole person is vital, which includes cultural and social aspects. **CerebralFix** and **Unic** add that hiring the right people (i.e. whose values align) is the key to create the desired culture. As such, recruiting is **not about hiring the best, but about the right people** for the organisation. **Snapper** stresses that it rather leaves a role unfilled than hiring a candidate who does not really fit into the culture. For **Dot**, the goal is to create a team of like-minded people with a common vision and similar values.

#### (Soft-skill) criteria for candidates

**Being a strong team player** is a criterion repeated throughout. Being emotionally intelligent is also particularly important due to the high levels of interaction. For **Boost** and **Humankind**, an ideal team player is motivated, self-aware, humble and people-savvy. **Ergon**, **Liip** and **Snapper** emphasise the importance to ensure a fit between candidate and team, which not only includes technical skills, but life experience, perspectives and personality.

**Ergon** and **Unic** stress the importance of being intrinsically motivated, showing initiative and **being self-reliant, while being a good communicator**. **Dot** adds being self-confident to that list. Being open-minded and having the ability to interact with other people are crucial for **Ströer** to cope with the dynamic environment. **Snapper** emphasises that the ability to learn, collaborate and problem-solve and requires good communication skills.

#### Being suited to the way of working

Another consensus among the organisation is the **necessity for candidates to being suited to the organisation's way of working**. **Redvespa** even calls the suitability for autonomous work under uncertain and flexible conditions the main hiring criterion. **Unic** agrees that candidates have to be comfortable to work in a very dynamic environment. The highly interactive hiring process at **Ströer** is aimed at assessing a candidate's fit with the collaborative way of working. This also includes whether candidates are willing to work in a non-hierarchical setting without traditional line management careers. The candidates attracted to **Liip** are curious about the company's way of working, which is made as explicit as possible throughout the hiring process. This ensures new employees are likely to thrive within self-organisation.

#### Onboarding as a cultural head-start

Even though onboarding practices differ between the organisation, there is a strong common thread of **focussing on networking and cultural onboarding**. At **Boost**, coffee chats kick-start relationship-building across the organisation and include the CEO as well as colleagues with little everyday interaction. A strength finder test fosters self-awareness and helps the team to understand

the skills the new employee adds to the team. New employees also are supported through an onboarding mentor and onboarding reviews after the first, second and third month. **Humankind** also prioritises relationship-building by setting up one-on-one chats with each team member, including the CEO, with an emphasis on establishing the company's collaborative way of working. New employees are supported by an onboarding mentor as well.

New employees at **Redvespa** are also allocated a (slightly more senior) **onboarding mentor for regular chats** during the first six months. The company stresses the importance of the onboarding process by comparing it to rolling out the red carpet. Accordingly, new employees spend the first three days at the headquarters for an induction with a focus on values and culture. Equally, new employees at **Ergon** are paired with an onboarding mentor (holding a similar role) who covers both the cultural and project-related onboarding. During the first three months, there are also onboarding reviews with the mentor and the team leader, which focus on integration and soft skills. **Ströer** changes onboarding mentors after the first period in order to expose new employees to different learning opportunities and perspectives. There are also onboarding retrospectives after week five, nine and twelve that take place as 360° reviews. After the last one, employees complete a behavioural analysis profile to initiate future development. New consultants at **Dot** are paired with a colleague who guides them through the process (i.e. also administratively) and does frequent check-ins. After three months, an onboarding retrospective covers strengths and potential for further development.

**Liip** and **Unic** both identify the **onboarding as a key process in self-organisation**. The former uses onboarding mentors as a branch-specific and multi-staffed role, whereas the latter centres the onboarding around an onboarding day (monthly) and an induction day (quarterly). **CerebralFix** also centres its onboarding around the company's culture and way of working. **Snapper** recognises the onboarding period as head-start for an individual's learning journey and hence focusses on identifying individual skills and needs.

#### Acknowledging the importance of the offboarding process

Several organisations describe paying particular attention to the offboarding process. Leaving an organisation does not have a bad connotation, but is merely seen as individuals moving on, as **Ströer** for example puts it. **Snapper** even helps its graduates to find roles in other organisations after successfully completing the training programme. **Unic** stresses that the offboarding period is both a socio-cultural and emotional process, and not just something administrative. The organisation likes to keep in touch with its **alumni, creating a network of relationships** rather than having clear boundaries. As **Boost**

wants to be transformational in people's lives and truly cares about them, this includes the realisation that some are better off elsewhere.

#### References for team dynamics

**Boost** and **Humankind** both reference Patrick Lencioni's concept of the *ideal team player* for understanding team dynamics. **Dot** mentions Bruce Tuckman's *stages of group development* and explains the innovation power of diverse teams with Peter Kruse's theories. **Boost** uses Susan Scott's *decision tree* for delegating decision-making.

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### Professional development and career definition

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#### Alternative definition of career and its challenges

Most of the organisations centre their understanding of personal and professional development around a role-based approach, as opposed to a linear career model with a clear advancement through individual functions. This **role-based approach often includes specialist careers and seniority levels**, with transparent criteria. **Unic**, for example, offers specialist careers along different job families and maturities. Individuals can easily switch between different specialist roles and are not locked into a linear career path. The career understanding at **Ströer** ties maturity levels (e.g. Junior, Intermediate, Senior) to clear expectations of an individual's impact on the team or company, without any other formal labels (e.g. team leader). **Boost** also reports seniority levels, yet otherwise avoids formal titles as well.

The alternative approach to careers does bring certain challenges with it. **Liip** and **Unic** state that their role-based system needs translation, for example for the client side or an external labour market that still relies on traditional career labels. Internally, the visibility of individual skills and achievements can also pose a challenge. **CerebralFix** adds that the maxim of autonomy and self-reliance may also be difficult for individuals that are used to working in highly structured work environments – or might even prefer that approach without continuously having to market and develop their skills.

#### Balancing individual and collective development

Skills development at **Humankind** might be driven by an individual employee's interest or a strategic capability gap. **CerebralFix** and **Ströer** share the view that a clear company purpose prevents the need for hurried upskilling and instead allows for clear goal orientation. Furthermore, individual skills always need to be judged from a team-perspective as well. For **Snapper**, the challenge lies in ensuring a balance between employees creating value with their existing skills and being granted the opportunity to develop new skills. **Boost** puts

employees in charge of this balance and calls them **responsible for both their own learning as well as the organisational learning**. Rituals such as fortnightly company-wide R&D days enable the latter. Similarly, **Dot** spends a day a fortnight on organisational development with the whole team, while expecting individual consultants to maximise their own learning outside these events.

According to **Dot**, **investing in individual and team development** is inevitable in any agile transformation, as people and their ability to change are named key success factors. In other organisations, this is reflected in references to the importance of soft skills. **Ströer**, for instance, stresses the significance of developing communication or resilience skills to cope with continuous change. **Boost** also emphasises soft skills, particularly in leadership development.

#### Self-driven and continuous development

The maxim of learning and continuous development is omnipresent in every single one of the organisations studied. Another commonality is the link between learning and individual careers. In this sense, a **career is the result of a self-driven process along one's strengths** and interests, rather than a pre-defined path offered by the organisation. **Boost** is probably the most radical, by demanding that working at the organisation ought to be a holistic, transformational experience, helping employees to unleash their full potential.

**Liip** makes it abundantly clear that, per se, **employees are responsible for their own growth** and for maximising their own learning. However, it is then viewed as the company's responsibility to remove impediments around learning and to create an abundance of different learning opportunities. Employees are empowered to spend whatever they think necessary to fulfil their roles. This attribution of dyadic responsibility can be found across other organisations as well. **Ströer** highlights that employees are responsible for their own learning, while the company facilitates conversations around growth opportunities and sets a training budget that employees can spend as they see fit. **Redvespa** calls individual passion and curiosity drivers of professional development. **Ergon** adopts a similar view when naming voluntariness, freedom and trust as basic principles of employee development. Accordingly, employees decide themselves how to spend their annual training budget. At **Dot**, individuals are expected to continuously further their personal as well as professional development, and participating in training is incentivised.

Whereas some employees immediately embody the idea of self-driven career, others might struggle. The sheer endless possibilities as a result of job-crafting are reported as one of these challenges, alongside the ability to network and communicate pro-actively. **Liip** considers **supporting these individuals a vital**

**task the organisation has to fulfil**, which is described as helping them to navigate the system without changing it for them.

#### Support structure around individual learning

The **emphasis on informal and on-the-job learning** seems to be connected to the concept of continuous development. However, the studied organisations have different practices around supporting individuals in their career crafting and continuous learning. These practices or roles focus on learning and development – outside general pastoral care, which is also present.

For **Snapper**, learning and working are inextricably linked. Participants of the graduate programme profit from coaches working alongside them on their projects, using every learning opportunity. **Coaches are responsible for setting the context and asking questions** to foster self-reflection. These senior experts find it highly rewarding to grow people on a day-to-day basis, and in return feel compelled to keep up with their own expertise. Every employee at **Boost** has a fortnightly coaching session with a self-selected (in-house or external) coach. Coaching-sessions include both personal goals as well as the employee's contribution to the company culture.

**Liip** has introduced the role of People Developer for questions of professional development and career planning. At **Redvespa**, it is a People and Culture Advisor who facilitates conversations around how individuals might spend their annual training budget. Alongside the existing role of Talent Developer as a general advisor, **Unic** recently established the role of Subject Guardian, who compensates for the lack of line managers, minus their hierarchical power. These **role holders act as development coaches for individual employees**.

**Humankind** highlights the importance of ensuring employees have the right type and amount of work to maximise learning without stretching them too much. This considered a **responsibility of the leadership team** and a result of close coaching relationship with employees.

#### No formal (performance) reviews

The vast majority of the organisations studied have abandoned annual performance reviews, if not all formal reviews. **Boost**, for instance, admits having trialled 360° performance reviews in the past, but has concluded that they were simply an excuse to bypass ongoing and honest conversations. The organisation's focus lies on the performance of the business as a whole instead of individual performance, as it is convinced its success depends on collaboration. Putting individual performance in the spotlight could be detrimental to that. While leaders at **Humankind** keep an eye on individual

performance and will raise issues in coaching sessions, overall organisational performance is shared daily. In a recent survey, employees again argued in favour of **ongoing coaching and development instead of formal feedback**.

After the 360° review at the end of the onboarding period, all reviews at **Ströer** become optional (on an individual or team level). However, employees are strongly encouraged to **continuously engage in both giving and asking for multi-directional feedback**, which is still described as an ongoing challenge. Similarly, even though **Unic** never had formal reviews, employees felt even less responsible for giving feedback with rolling-out full self-organisation. This is especially the case with critical feedback. The organisation is currently experimenting with different approaches, such as peer feedback (e.g. in role fit meetings or fishbowls), as well as strengthening the involvement of HR roles.

At **Redvespa**, there is an annual conversation between employees and an HR role holder, yet merely as an outlook on the following year. Annual performance reviews are replaced by direct, **project-specific mid- and post-assignment reviews**, which include feedback from the client.

**Dot** makes **no difference between billable and non-billable hours** and considers everything an investment in the company. It does, however, have full financial transparency and keeps track of overall revenue and contribution.

#### Formal (performance) reviews as conversation starters

At **Snapper**, participants of the graduate programme initiate performance reviews one to three times a year by nominating a product owner and a coach. These sessions include both self-reflection and feedback from the wider team and are focussed on **opening a dialogue around individual skills development** (without any comparison with peers). Formal performance reviews for senior staff, however, were seen as more of a chore and have been discontinued years ago. Recently, the organisation experimented with gathering feedback directly from graduates instead, which was met with great interest.

Performance reviews at **CerebralFix** used to be viewed as simply ticking boxes, without any real value for anyone involved. After being overhauled completely, they now are centred entirely around company values and include self-reflection, peer feedback and feedback from the leadership team. Instead of trying to measure technical ability, they now are **aimed at facilitating conversations**. Similarly, annual performance reviews at **Ergon** are deemed conversation starters. The goals discussed with the team leader are set by the employee and mostly include soft skills. To support this process, HR provides a range of semi-structured guides that may be used.

### Communication culture: both a success factor and a challenge

A strong communication culture has been mentioned by all organisation studied as a key success factor for business agility, characterised by **all members of the organisation communicating openly and honestly**. **Liip** recognises that establishing such a communication culture is a lengthy process, and requires continuous investment.

**Building habits around ongoing communication** is a major focus of the transformation at **CerebralFix**, e.g. through ritualised meetings such as stand-ups, reviews or retrospectives and soft skills around understanding each other. To empower employees to cope with organisational change by being able to voice their concerns and creating a common language, **Ströer** has proactively engaged in communication training. **Dot** calls open and direct communication its preferred tool for resolving tension.

While **Ergon** calls open communication the foundation for all collaboration, it acknowledges that **addressing conflicts or criticism remains a challenge** for many employees. **Unic** agrees that some employees may need significant help in adopting the communication habits required. This is especially the case with employees having to make their own decisions and operating largely independent. Rather counter-intuitively, this means that self-organisation actually requires more support structure.

### Direct, immediate and ongoing feedback

The ability to **embed constant feedback loops into daily routine** is mentioned as a part of the desired communication culture across all studied organisations. Feedback, in this light, is multi-directional and becomes a responsibility of all organisational members. **Snapper** calls it a foundation stone of working in a highly autonomous environment and expect it to be a part of everyday collaboration. Building practices around open communication is described as a main driver to embark on the agile transformation.

**Boost** combines different approaches to feedback by fostering ongoing and honest conversations between peers, including feedback in the fortnightly coaching sessions, as well as offering more in-depth feedback on-demand. **Dot** and **Redvespa** agree that **direct feedback has the highest impact**, as opposed to formal reviews or performance tracking with a time-lag. **Humankind** integrates feedback in coaching sessions between employees and leaders, yet acknowledges that some employees might need more guidance or check-ins than others. Simultaneously, fostering quality conversations is a priority across the organisation, which is reported to be closely linked to building trusting relationships where people feel comfortable to share mistakes.



Internally, **Ströer** relies on informal peer feedback and on-demand feedback. However, the company acknowledges that taking the time for more structured feedback is proving difficult during busy periods. Similarly, **Ergon** recognises that some **employees may struggle with giving direct, critical feedback**, which is why fostering an open feedback culture is a current priority. For **Liip**, employees also have to embrace being challenged by their peers as a result of the habit advice-giving that replaces management structures.

Feedback also transcends the organisational boundaries and includes the customer. **Ströer**, for instance, uses fast feedback loops as a way to **connect employees with the end customer**, to quickly incorporate change and foster conversations rooted in reality. This requires employees to be able to discuss issues openly, show empathy and ask for help. **CerebralFix** uses customer feedback to verify it responds to actual customer needs. At the same time, communication is also described as the most powerful tool in driving organisational change.

#### References for personality traits and communication

**Ströer** and **Unic** mention the DISC chart as a method for creating behavioural analysis profiles (i.e. linked to Hartman Personality Profiles). **Boost** mentions the CliftonStrengths test as another assessment tool for personality profiles.

**CerebralFix** mentions Kim Scott's book *Radical Candor* in relation to creating an honest feedback culture. **Boost** incorporates Gary Chapman's five *love languages* into employee profiles to explain differences in individual communication styles. When talking about fostering self-awareness, Brené Brown's ideology of *vulnerability and shame* is also introduced.

**Liip** quotes Reinhard K. Sprenger to illustrate that many organisations show patronising behaviour towards their employees. **CerebralFix** uses Dan Pink's *human motivators* (i.e. mastery, purpose, autonomy) to explain employee behaviour. The *Cynefin framework* is also mentioned as a method for categorising problems into different levels of complexity.

#### 5.4. Enabling organisational structure

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##### Organising HR work

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###### Different enabling structures instead of *best practice*

While the organisations share an understanding of the purpose of HR and people management, they **differ in their structural dimension** (i.e. their chosen enabling structure). There are three distinguishable approaches:

###### Approach 1: hybrid structure with clear accountability

*This approach is signified by clearly assigning HR and people management accountability to a single role, while empowering leaders and teams to collaborate on setting and implementing both principles and practices.*

While **Ergon** clearly assigns accountability to the role Head of HR, the organisation underlines the importance of distributing responsibility for people management. As individual employee experiences largely happens on a team level, teams are increasingly empowered to do HR work. With this in mind, the **centralised role acts as an aggregator, driver as well as an on-demand expert**. The increasing decentralisation follows the motif of wanting to be as close as possible to the individual, while holistically empowering teams.

**Humankind** highlights that while every member of the organisation is responsible for the work environment, accountability ultimately needs to be assigned to one role. This role can thus be characterised as driving the vision forward and taking ownership for continuous improvement – in this case the company's COO (i.e. chief operating officer). **HR and people management are summarised in an own *employee experience model***, which is used both internally and for consultant work. It includes four different types of experiences: *Purpose* (e.g. vision, purpose and how people believe in it), *relationship* (i.e. connections), *enabling* (e.g. physical workplace, tools, information available) and *performance* (e.g. recognition, sense of accomplishment, opportunity for improvement and mastery).

**Ströer** calls its HR Coordinator a sensor for the general feel of the company and driver for all people-related topics. However, all HR work is ultimately delivered by autonomous teams with fluid leadership roles.

###### Approach 2: distributed and role-based approach

*Even more consistent in its role-based ideology, this approach assigns accountability for designing and accomplishing HR work to a number of different roles across the organisation.*

**Liip** underlines that people interested in owning HR roles should be approachable, empathic, and pragmatic thinkers. All HR roles are classified internal service providers, emphasising that they are responsible for providing support for the organisation and its people where they are needed the most. HR roles are bundled in two circles. The circle Personnel Administration serves the purpose of accompanying potential and current employees during their life cycle, while fulfilling legal obligations. It includes roles that cover accountabilities in employer branding, emergencies, labour contracts, employee statistics or administration. It also contains the role of HR Specialist, which is multi-staffed with a branch focus to be close to individual employees. Roles in the circle People Development are currently all owned by people with no previous HR expertise. Their accountabilities include ensuring employee development and pathways, as well as feedback. Every employee is assigned a People Developer, whose role is also included in this circle.

In line with the rest of the organisation, **Unic** bundles up HR tasks in various roles. Ownership of these roles is legitimised by interest and individual competencies. Individuals therefore hold several roles, which usually change over time, depending on personal strength and development. As such, there are many HR role-holders with no background in traditional HR, especially for the roles of (Subject Matter Expertise) Recruiter or Subject Guardian. Other HR roles include HR Recruiter, HR Business Partner, HR Administrator, HR Marketing Manager, HR Communication, HR Analyst, Discount Detector or Legal Advisor. These roles are mostly multi-staffed and have a local focus whenever possible, to be as close to the individual employee as possible. As the organisational structure is very dynamic, the roles listed are simply an exemplary snapshot, and will change again over time.

At **Redvespa**, accountabilities around people management and wellbeing are distributed across several roles. The role Culture Officer sets the framework that helps translating the organisation's values into action (e.g. by setting up the enabling structure and practices). This role is currently multi-staffed with a focus on two regions. The Head of Communications and Wellness has a particular focus on mental health and connectedness. Every employee is assigned a People and Culture Advisor, which is another multi-staffed role with a regional focus. These role-holders are responsible for providing direct care and support for the capability development for a maximum of 30 employees, while supporting their capability development. Talent Sourcing Advisors engage in screening potential candidates. Supporting all these current roles, the CEO acts as a strong driver of the organisation's people-focussed culture.

### **Approach 3: Network of coaches and servant leaders**

*Transcending the assignment of people management-related roles, these organisations integrate all HR and people management aspects directly into a network of coaches or servant leaders.*

Albeit having a role called HR (who is mostly responsible for recruiting), the whole structure at **Boost** is centred around the idea of replacing management with coaching. Instead of line management, the organisation has a dedicated group of servant leaders who are responsible for driving the organisation forward through maximising both their own as well as the organisational learning. Every employee has a self-selected coach instead of a manager, who acts as a sparring-partner without having any formal power over them.

Alongside a number of servant leaders at **CerebralFix**, the general manager (called Head of Studio) is dedicated to growing the people and the organisation, fostering a culture of genuinely delegated authority. She describes looking after people and processes as a part of her role, yet stresses that she merely drives initiatives and supports the collaborative definition of the organisation's practices. The CTO also explains his own role as a catalyst for innovation, by accompanying individuals to learn, grow and take risks.

Set up as a network structure, **Dot** replaces all people management function through peer-mentoring and (mostly external) coaching.

**Snapper** is entirely built around the idea of providing autonomous teams with a number of coaches and other roles that accompany their personal and professional growth on an every-day basis. The leadership team understands itself as servant leaders that are dedicated to enable people to flourish and collaborate. As an example, the CTO stresses that the *t* in his role actually should stand for *talent* instead of *technology*, as he is dedicated to nurturing talent instead of acting as a bottle-neck for decision-making.

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### **Organisational model and structure**

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**Liip**, **Redvespa**, **Snapper** and **Unic** use Holacracy as their organisational model, which ties authority to roles instead of people. The organisational structure consists of a dynamically changing circular hierarchy and a set of roles within those circles. Both circles and roles are defined with a clear purpose and accountabilities. Holacracy is a way to implement self-organisation across a whole company. **Dot** uses a simple and fluid network structure without formal labels and shared leadership for its organisation. **Boost**, **CerebralFix**, **Ergon**, **Humankind** and **Ströer** all use some kind of leadership structure with a flat

hierarchy, yet vary in how they organise their project-based work. Regardless of their current model, there are a number of **characteristics that can be detected across the different organisations**.

#### Avoiding bureaucracy and silo-building

A number of organisations name their **own past experiences as drivers towards agility and self-organisation**. Even though it was organised extremely well, **Unic** describes itself as having been lethargic and slow-moving in the past. **Snapper** observed its own previous scaling-efforts as contradictory to its culture, by immediately boosting control-mechanisms and protocols. Before the introduction of Agile, the company also portrays itself as having worked in silos despite its small size at that time. **Humankind** also stresses that, even while scaling up, the organisation prefers to operate on principles rather than building restrictive processes.

#### Organisation as a dynamic entity

Another common thread seems to be the avoidance of process-heavy approaches and instead opting for fluid structures than can easily be adjusted to match current needs. **Snapper** describes its own **organisation as a living organism that evolves** with the overarching purpose and values. **Dot** reinforces that the structure of the company must be chosen to foster desired practices, in its case direct collaboration and communication. And as people are a dynamic entity, the organisation needs to be easily adjustable as well. **Liip** further highlights the importance of building an agile and innovative organisation around the work that has to be done, pointing out that, by definition, it will always be in transformation. **Unic** highlights that organisational fluidity makes any future reorganisation efforts futile.

#### Role-based approach across the organisation

Most of the organisations studied have implemented a role-based approach, which means that power is distributed by tying it to a set of roles. **Unic** explains that individuals can **hold different roles and have different realms of power and decision-making capacity** tied to these different roles. Roles may be multi-staffed, which means that the same role can be owned by different people. Every role is defined with a purpose and accountabilities, which sets clear expectations and fosters transparency. Job-crafting is encouraged by accepting or adjusting roles according to individual strengths and interests. **Snapper** underscores that roles are not tied to an employee's contract with the organisation, which allows individuals to move freely within the organisation. Roles are built around the job that has to be done, and thus always linked to the company goals. **Redvespa** also emphasises the possibility to develop roles fluidly over time, according to individual strengths and passions.

### Self-organisation and delegated authority

Self-organisation seems to be an inherent part of business agility for the studied organisations, and is repeatedly mentioned throughout all cases. Self-organisation is not free of hierarchy, as **Liip** highlights, as it allows individuals to set their own priorities and make their own decisions, while serving the purpose of their roles. In line with this definition, **Unic** has chosen **self-organisation as a way to allow individuals to take over more responsibility** and drive innovation. However, the organisation stresses the fact that frameworks for self-organisation, such as Holacracy, merely serve as a structural basis while cultural and human aspects have to be deliberately added to it. According to **Ströer**, the possibility of taking on responsibility and driving your own development contribute to employee engagement and commitment.

The empowerment of teams and individuals is a cornerstone of all studied organisations. **Ergon** refers to delegated authority as being granted the freedom to tailor your work and work environment to your individual needs and strengths. **CerebralFix** uses **delegated authority as a systematic approach to raise entrepreneurial awareness**, increase decision-making capability and ensuring that everyone in the organisation has a voice. Distributing thought leadership at **Humankind** also supports the maxim of meritocracy (e.g. based on individual skills and interests). At **Redvespa**, consultants and teams operate largely independent, which reinforces entrepreneurial behaviour.

Several organisations work with **elements of self-selection**. Consultants at **Redvespa**, for instance, work in self-selected quads, doubling up as a support structure. For work-related and non-work-related topics, individuals can also establish or join so-called guilds. These cross-organisational communities of interests or expertise are called chapters at **Ströer**.

### Maximising decision-making capability

According to **Liip**, **removing bottlenecks for decision-making** is a main driver, unburdening leaders and shifting authority to role-holders who are likely to be more knowledgeable on the subject-matter. **Snapper** reinforces this argument by stating that leaders' resources should rather be invested in ensuring alignment of the decisions made and growing decision-making capacity. The CEO of **Boost** states that he was the company's biggest bottleneck before choosing not to be involved in operational decisions anymore. The organisations use a number of ways to maximise decision-making capability.

**Ströer** encourages individuals to be involved in decision-making if they are interested in a certain topic or if they are affected by a decision's outcome. The **process of distributed decision-making** is described as highly collaborative,

which can lead to rather lengthy procedures. On the other end of the spectrum, **Unic** describes that consensus is not a goal for decision-making, as it is thought to impede speed. Instead, the guiding principle of *causing no harm* allows role holders to run quick experiments and implement small changes on a regular basis. However, individuals are urged to seek advice and include different perspectives when making decisions. Learning where they add the most value and how to make their own decisions can pose a big challenge for some individuals, as **Liip** points out.

#### References for self-organisation

The concept of Holacracy has been quoted across the different organisations far more than any other framework or theory, with a total of over a hundred references by **Dot**, **Ergon**, **Humankind**, **Liip**, **Ströer**, **Snapper** and **Unic**.

Sociocracy, as another **framework for self-organisation**, has been mentioned by **Dot**, **Ströer** and **Unic**.

**CerebralFix** refers to the methodology of *Delegation Poker* (by Jurgen Appelo) in the context of delegated authority. Other **references around learning organisations** include Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline* and Barry O'Reilly's book *Unlearn*. **Snapper** mentions Netflix's document on freedom, diversity and culture. **Boost** speaks of complexity theory and democratic or freedom-centred organisations in reference to being a member of the WorldBlu association.

## 5.5. Concluding the analysis

This chapter has analysed the emergent practice alongside four themes, consolidating the results section of this study. These themes have identified agile people management as being based on common **core principles** that are solidified in a **general approach to HRM and people management**. These principles are **embedded in practices**, and thus being stabilised and reproduced, while a fluid **organisational structure** wraps itself around these practices. The next chapter 6 synthesises these insights and merges them into a framework for organising HR work in agile organisations.



## 6. Discussion

The previous two chapters presented the results of this research. Each individual case was first depicted in chapter 4, providing a rich and in-depth portray of each organisations' specific practices and general approach to people management. Chapter 5 then followed with an analysis across all ten organisations, to identify patterns in their individual expressions. Both chapters reflected these complex and socially constructed realities in a narrative manner. In doing so, they fulfilled the first part of the research objectives and aims, as stated in section 1.4, by describing the emergent practice around HR work in agile organisations and identifying common patterns and recurring themes. These descriptions are now interpreted, compared with the current HR paradigm and integrated – in order to be synthesised into a framework for people management in agile organisations. In doing so, section 6.1 of the present chapter fulfils the remainder of the objectives and aims. Section 6.2 then validates the new conceptual framework, thus concluding the discussion.

## 6.1. Synthesis

In agile organisations, *people* seem to be less a resource that needs to be orchestrated, and more a source of future-proofing the business itself. As such, people management moves from being an ordinary to a *dynamic capability*, and from being strategy-led to being *talent-led*. In light of these shifts, this section addresses how people management may be framed as a shared social practice instead of a profession. From this perspective, organisations become ecosystems of talent, where implicit and distributed leadership fosters a culture of learning and knowledge sharing – all with a clear customer focus. The enabling structure around these principles then becomes secondary.

This synthesis is presented in two sections: the first section 6.1.1 summarises the characteristics of agile people management, uniting the emerging practice observed in the ten organisations studied, as summarised in chapters 4 and 5, with the existing literature on agile organisations and HR work (see sections 2.2 and 2.3, respectively). Comments on code allocation (as shown in and Table 17 in section 3.2.1) in the primary data also aid in establishing the narrative.

### 6.1.1. Agile people management: from profession to shared social practice

To summarise the key attributes of people management in agile organisations, this section replicates the structure of the cross-case summary from the previous chapter 5. The logic behind the structure declares **(1a) core principles** as the foundation of all decisions manifested in the **(1b) general approach to people management**, gives **(2) examples of embedding principles in practices** and debates restraints for a suitable **(3) enabling organisational structure** around these practices. A reflection of the **challenges and tensions** of agile people management closes this first section.

### (1a) Core principles

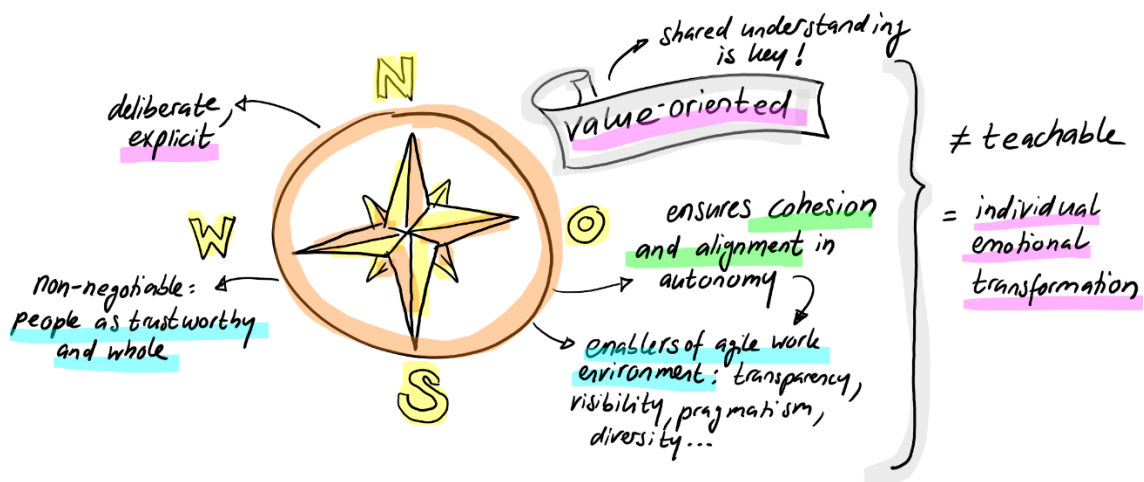


Figure 23 Visualisation of the core principles  
Own figure

In line with the strong value-orientation of agile organisations (described in section 2.2), the companies studied exhibited a very deliberate and explicit approach in choosing a set of guiding principles. It is thus of little surprise that the code *purpose / values / principles* was by far the most allocated code across all interviews, with 237 allocations – with the second-ranking code *learning organisation* counting 173 allocations. Figure 23 shows how these guiding principles may serve as a compass or decision aid and safeguard a sense of coherence across the organisation: by embedding the guiding principles into practices and the organisational vocabulary – thus essentially shaping day-to-day interaction. A strong shared understanding of these principles is therefore the prerequisite for alignment and distributed decision-making in highly autonomous environments. However, it is important to keep in mind that values cannot simply be declared or transported through teaching. In the contrary, individuals need to actively engage with values to internalise them, as they can only be part of an individual “emotional transformation” (Arnold, 2021, p. 18).

While the organisations studied may differ slightly in their current focus, they all share a common view on people as trustworthy and whole individuals. Without this foundational belief, creating an environment where these individuals are then granted autonomy would not be possible. Maximising the decision-making capacity within the organisation is a crucial enabler of the speed and ability to change that these organisations so desperately need. In this network of empowered people, the capacity to learn relies on individuals as the smallest unit of the organisation. The rest of the principles thus circles around enablers of this agile work environment, such as transparency and visibility, pragmatism or diversity. The holistic view on capable people considerably more present throughout empirical study than in the emerging literature, and included the deduction that people have to be allowed to be their authentic selves at work in order to live up to their full potential.

### (1b) General approach to people management

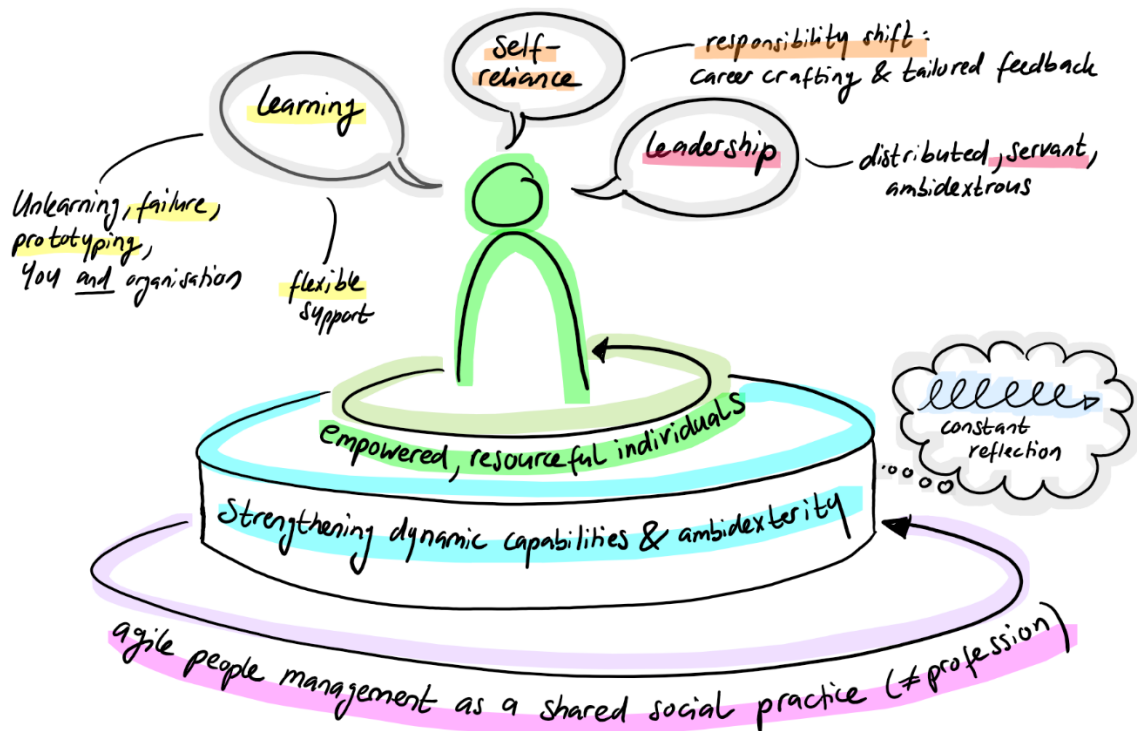


Figure 24 Visualisation of the general approach to people management

Own figure

The emergent practice clearly shows that customer-focus and people-centricity are not contradictory. While work is organised around the fulfilment of changing customer needs, the organisation itself needs to serve the needs of its people – and not vice-versa. The organisations studied establish a clear connection between happy employees, happy clients and a happy company. To kick-start this cycle by focusing on people makes sense especially in the service industry, where people are often the main source of value creation, amplified by a need to attract scarce talent. The goal of HR work in agile organisations is empowering resourceful, whole individuals to collaborate in a highly autonomous environment, taking over responsibility for their realm of autonomy according to their skills and interests. Figure 24 illustrates this general approach of people management, as explained in this segment.

In line with the general **network- and role-based approach** of agile organisations, HR work seems to be increasingly distributed among “ecosystems of people” that may even expand beyond the individual organisation (Denning, 2015, p. 10). Being able to tap into external networks is particularly important for SMEs, in order not to limit themselves to their own experience (Bacon & Hoque, 2005, p. 1979).

*HR admin / legal* represents the least-allocated code with just 16 allocations across all case study interviews – being absent from two thirds of the conversations entirely. Where it is mentioned, it is referred to as a *hygiene factor*: strictly operational work is deemed a necessity and has to be integrated into every-day life as smoothly as possible. This stance replaces the claim of previous HR professionalisation endeavours (as described in the Ulrich model in

section 2.3) to solely focus on strategic work and outsource everything else. Instead, there is a seamless **integration of operational work** (e.g. services and administrative tasks) with a user-centric perspective. As such, operational work becomes a part of the ongoing debate between efficiency and effectiveness – again an aspect where tensions are acknowledged and met with ambidexterity as opposed to avoiding them.

While the core principles outlined above set the foundation, the **approach to people management in agile organisations** can be defined by the pillars of **(1) learning**, **(2) self-reliance** and **(3) distributed and ambidextrous leadership**.

**(1) Learning:** Section 2.2 showed how the organisational need for internalising change stems from changing customer needs in dynamic markets. As technology, products and services change, employees' skills need to change with them. In that regard, agile organisations can be considered *learning organisations*, where employees are not only responsible for maximising their own learning, but also for the organisational learning at large.

While the importance of learning is emphasised in the emerging literature, the empirical study also revealed the importance of unlearning and failure. As trivial as that difference may sound at first glance, it entails enormous consequences for HR work: by demanding the establishment of an error culture where making mistakes is encouraged, instead of frowned upon, and where learned behaviour is constantly questioned. This is done mainly by encouraging experimenting and prototyping as a way to quickly learn one's way forward – in a complex environment where only the next step or two may be visible. At the same time, this focus on (un-)learning as a driver of change obviates the need for over-engineered HR programmes. Instead, HR work focuses on supporting individuals and groups in a highly contextual and flexible manner. As competencies replace factual knowledge, individual ability for self-organised learning and self-reflection gain importance (Arnold, 2021, pp. 16-17).

**(2) self-reliance:** as a consequence of the empowerment paradigm, a large amount of responsibility shifts to the individual employee, requiring a high degree of self-awareness and second-order thinking from every organisational member (Sfirtsis & Moenaert, 2010, p. 6). In its wake, individuals are forced to take over responsibility for their own actions and can no longer delegate blame (Arnold, 2021, p. 73). Personal realms of autonomy include being responsible for one's own development. Together with the often role-based approach in agile organisations, that entails a major shift towards non-linear and portfolio careers that are driven by the individual. This may include specialist careers or seniority levels, changing and customisable roles or even a rejection of formal job titles altogether. These individually curated careers are designed along individual strengths and interests.

At the same time, personal fulfilment has to be balanced with a company's needs and purpose, and individual learning has to be balanced with collective learning. The fact that *development / performance* was the third-most allocated code in the interviews reveals that these topics

preoccupy many organisations. It also explains the shift towards informal and on-the-job learning in agile organisations, as a sign of continuous development closely linked to one's own professional identity. HR work in this area then seeks to support individuals in their career or role crafting and continuous learning, e.g. through coaching, ad-hoc mentoring or flexible training offerings that are often focused on knowledge-sharing, connecting insight with the collective and self-reflection. Where still present at all, yearly performance reviews merely serve as conversation starters, while actual performance management relies on direct, multi-directional and impact-related feedback in a largely transparent work environment.

**(3) Leadership:** HR work is integrated in leadership in two ways. *Firstly, distributed leadership* in agile organisations can be contextual and spontaneous, and reflect individuals taking ownership of something they care about (e.g. driving wellbeing aspects or overhauling the onboarding process). Being fluid and role-based, this kind of leadership allows individuals to be both leaders and followers in different contexts (Zeier et al., 2018, p. 2). Thus, distributed leadership avoids bottlenecks and moves decision-making closer to where the subject-matter expertise lies, and often “undercuts reporting lines, formal hierarchies, and possibly known sources and alliances of power within an organisation” (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 324).

*Secondly*, the case study highlights that while traditional line management may no longer add any value to organisations, leadership skills are still in high demand. Catalytic or *servant leadership* supports and coaches individuals in navigating autonomy and crafting their own career path, instead of micromanaging them (Parker et al., 2015, p. 119). Servant leadership also acts as a trigger for organisational development, by “prompting cognitive shifts; naming and shaping identity; engaging dialogue about difference” (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 323). In doing so, leaders also act as role models, “encouraging others to act similarly” (Zeier et al., 2018, p. 4). Both of these ways emphasise the systemic nature of agile leadership: as an attitude of integrating flexibility, self-observation and self-reflection into one's own role(s) and actions (Arnold, 2021, p. 7).

From an **organisational theory perspective**, these observations can be framed in two ways: agile people management strengthens the *dynamic capabilities* and *ambidexterity* of an organisation, and benefits from being reframed as a *shared social practice*.

**Focus on dynamic capabilities and ambidexterity:** the empirical study endorses that dynamic capabilities are difficult to create and hard to imitate. All organisations studied centre their operations around continuous change and their response to uncertainty. In line with Teece (2017, p. 698), these organisations show that dynamic capabilities do not exist only in leaders, but also in an “organisation's values, culture and collective ability”. They do so in the most consistent way possible: it is not just a handful of managers that drive the organisation forward, but every member, through distributed leadership and sharing HR work (Worley & Lawler, 2010, p. 197). These companies show how ambidexterity can be integrated throughout the system, by fostering entrepreneurial thinking across the organisation instead of delegating

it to top management – by adopting questioning stance. Thus, every member of the organisation is responsible for transformation and enacting organisational ambidexterity, by actively manage tensions between *efficiency* and *effectiveness*, between *exploitation* and *exploration* (Buisson et al., 2021, p. 491; Plimmer et al., 2017, pp. 1434, 1436). This is a stark difference to the commonly adopted position that higher-order capabilities are reserved for top management, while employees lack the skill set required (Birkinshaw et al., 2016, p. 54; O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2013, p. 12).

**Reframing agile people management as a shared social practice:** the characteristics of agile people management in this section paint a picture that is very different from HRM in bureaucratic organisations (as described in section 2.3). Traditionally, different “managerial professions” compete for status and control by showing how their expertise can solve business problems (Wright, 2008, p. 1066). In contrast, agile organisations rarely tie people and functions together, and staff functions are diminishing. However, both the emergent practice and literature proved that competencies related to people management are in higher demand than ever. In this environment, HRM finds a way to reshape itself as a driver of agility (Saha et al., 2017, p. 326). Moving past the previous struggle of becoming a profession at all cost (as was the endeavour of Ulrich and colleagues summarised in section 2.3), *HR for Agile* shows a clear tendency to be distributed beyond traditional HR roles, and indeed across the whole organisation – in the true sense of dynamic capabilities embedded in principles, leadership and the collective (Teece, 2017, p. 698).

The organisational focus shifts on creating stimulating learning environments and fostering self-organised learning instead of force-feeding knowledge (Arnold, 2002, p. 33). For SMEs in particular, this approach takes their uniqueness and context into consideration, without giving in to what Harney and Dundon (2006, p. 49) call the “little big business syndrome”. In conclusion, looking at people management in agile organisations through the lens of a *shared social practice* (as established in section 2.4 and chapter 3) has proven itself to be a valuable alternative. Shared social practices provide a cultural fabric woven throughout the organisation, by which people can enact and reproduce (i.e. stabilise) organisational principles by exercising distributed and ambidextrous leadership. Seeing agile people management as a shared social practice may also help to overcome the barriers to organisational ambidexterity outlined in section 2.2: by reducing organisational boundaries, amplifying know-ledge sharing and communication practices (Sfirtsis & Moenaert, 2010, p. 10).

## (2) Examples of embedding principles in practices

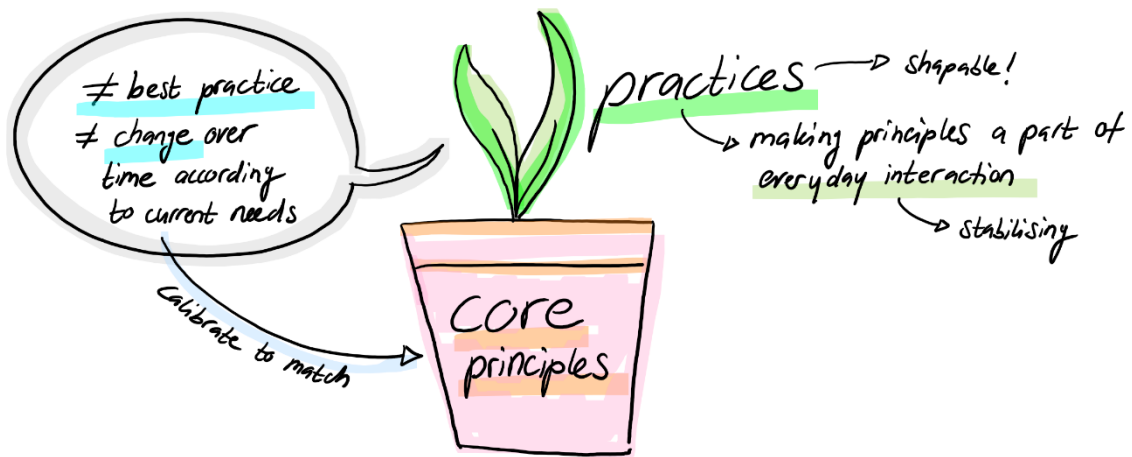


Figure 25 Visualisation of embedding principles in practice  
Own figure

The paragraphs above explained how core principles lay the ground for HR work in agile organisations. These principles and characteristics are then embedded in practices that are a part of everyday interaction, which allows alignment with the company's values and purpose despite a highly autonomous environment. Figure 25 demonstrates this connection between core principles (manifested in the general approach to people management) and practices. Individual practices will not be repeated in this section again, as the examples of all ten case study organisations are gathered in chapter 4, and grouped and analysed in chapter 5.

However, a quick glance at recruiting practices shall serve as an example of how principles can be integrated. First of all, there again is no *best practice* for how recruiting is done, and practices differ (e.g. via a dedicated HR or recruiting role, a leadership role or as a collaborative team effort), yet there are a few common features:

- The recruiting process often reflects decentralisation and team-orientation.
- There is a tendency to involve as many team members in the process as possible – as they are the ones that need to closely collaborate with the new employee.
- The company values and the agile way of working act as main elements of attracting talent.
- Cultural fit wins over technical fit, as recruiting is about hiring the *right* instead of the *best* people.
- There is a focus on communication, collaboration and self-reflection skills when checking for a candidate's suitability for the organisation's way of working.
- The onboarding provides a direct link from recruiting to *immersing* a person in the culture, with a major focus on relationship-building.

These commonalities (i.e. criteria for candidates and recruiting process in general) all correspond with the **(1a) core principles of agile HRM** and the **(1b) general approach to people management** explained above.



### (3) Requirements for an enabling organisational structure (level organisation)

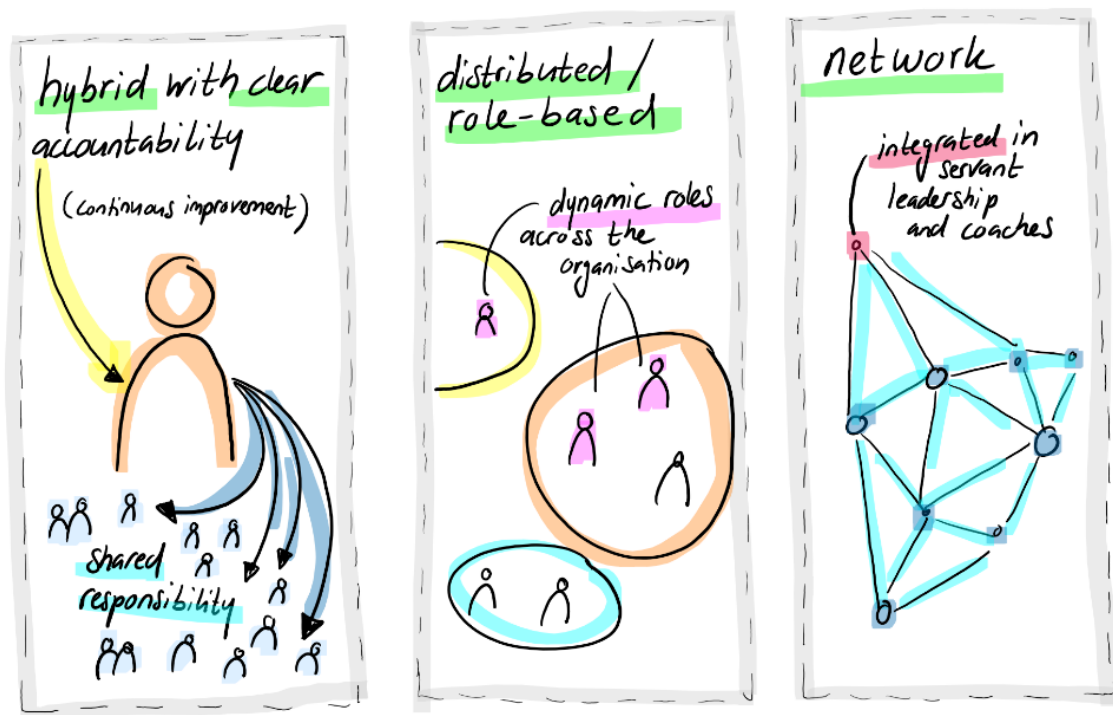


Figure 26 Visualisation of the enabling organisational structure  
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The emergent practice manifested three different ways of organising the sharing of HR work among different roles (as described in-depth in section 5.2 and exemplified in Figure 26) Figure 26. Other approaches are feasible as long as they integrate with the core principles and pillars mentioned above.

- **Approach (1) hybrid structure with clear accountability:** assigning accountability for people management to a single role (in the sense of driving continuous improvement), with shared responsibility for HR work via distributed leadership and including as many organisational members as possible in designing practices.
- **Approach (2) distributed and role-based approach:** following the role-based ideology of agile organisations, accountability for both designing people management practices and fulfilling HR work is assigned to a number of different (and dynamic) roles across the organisation.
- **Approach (3) network of coaches and servant leaders:** all people management aspects are directly integrated into servant leadership, for instance via a network of coaches or as an integral part of leadership roles.

The whole organisation wraps around this ecosystem of roles and practices. As a dynamic and fluid entity, it needs to adapt quickly with changing needs – learning its way forward through a focus on dynamic capabilities. Current structures of the case study organisations can once again be found in chapter 4 individually, or collectively in chapter 5. There is no *best practice* or

blueprint to follow, and these examples merely reflect what structure these organisations currently consider helpful. By the time this research is published, they will most likely have implemented structural changes again, stressing the importance of choosing a structure than can be easily adapted. This is why agile organisations are often compared with *learning organisations* or *complex adaptive systems*, as expanded on in section 2.2, constantly re-calibrating between alignment and autonomy by implementing ambidextrous leadership. The fact that organisational structure is the fourth-most allocated code (with 140 allocations) reflects the lack of *best practice* approaches, resulting in interviewees feeling compelled to explain their current structure and the reasoning behind it.

### Tensions and challenges

Despite the many perceived benefits of agile people management and its seeming organisational fit, there are a number of challenges it brings in its wake. Many of these challenges present ongoing tensions that need to be continuously acknowledged and do not allow quick solutions. Looping back to section 5.3, somehow counter-intuitively, organisations with an emphasis on self-organisation and empowerment actually seem to require a more sophisticated support structure than hierarchic and bureaucratic organisations.

**(1) Resilience and agility-stability paradox:** Agility touches every layer of the organisation and entails continuous change. Individuals may easily feel overwhelmed by the amount of uncertainty and the speed of change, especially if an organisation falls short in providing an ample support structure around individuals to grow their resilience and find their voice. Constantly trading off efficiency against effectiveness can also be extremely challenging and requires individuals to embrace this paradox between agility and stability rather than trying to externalise it (Smith & Lewis, 2012, p. 73).

**(2) Learning how to take over responsibility:** whereas employees are likely to have traditional management systems internalised through school and education, they are often less accustomed to self-organisation, and often have to unlearn how to be micromanaged. Organisations frequently take this process of unlearning for granted, and presume employees are immediately able to adopt full responsibility for themselves and the decision-making capacity within their roles (Kissel & Mikus, 2016, p. 39). However, this journey towards autonomy and self-reliance might again be a lengthy process that requires plenty of support. To simply replace one extreme (i.e. micromanaging) with another (i.e. full self-organisation) is neither feasible in practice nor in-line with agile principles (as summarised in section 2.4). Some individuals might need more guidance than others, encouraging a one-size-fits-all approach in supporting employees. Remembering that being a part of one social practice prohibits practitioners from joining another (e.g. traditional management versus agile leadership) further amplifies the need for facilitating self-reflection instead of taking it for granted, and guiding employees through the process of adjusting to new social practices (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 320).

**(3) Visibility and alternative career paths:** the visibility and compatibility of non-linear career paths seems to pose an ongoing challenge for many agile organisations. This includes the need to translate internal roles and portfolio careers to both non-agile clients (e.g. for justifying pricing and experience) or the labour market. The lack of visibility of professional achievements in the traditional sense (e.g. via promotions, praise from line management etcetera) also requires organisations to develop new ways of showing appreciation.

**(4) Balancing individual and collective needs:** the alternative approach to career paths and making employees responsible for their own learning adds another layer to the challenge of balancing individual and organisational needs, as well as how different perspectives can be merged into a collective identity. Creating a shared understanding of the company's purpose and principles seems to play a vital role in combining these two dimensions, yet can be difficult in itself – especially during busy day-to-day life.

**(5) Open and direct communication:** establishing a communication culture around open, critical and transparent feedback poses another enormous challenge, albeit being called a prerequisite to a thriving agile organisation. Communication is closely linked to self-reflection, and both of them are tools to make decisions and discourses explicit, and enable the questioning and adapting of social practices.

#### 6.1.2. Condensing the empirically grounded conceptual framework

The previous section 6.1.1 established people management in agile organisations as a shared social practice, resulting in a decentralisation of HR work from functional specialists to individuals, teams and indeed the whole system – essentially becoming a part of organisational development. It also developed a conceptual framework...

- ...by showing how agile organisations embed their core principles in practices,
- ...incorporating the three pillars of *learning*, *self-reliance* and *leadership*,
- ...wrap an enabling structure around these practices (again forsaking *best practice*)
- ...and rely on flexible solutions meeting current needs of the organisation and people.

The alignment of core principles and purpose, people management practices and the enabling structure seems to be the catalyst of the speed and autonomy these organisations need – by maximising decision-making capacity and entrepreneurial thinking while allowing people to pursue their strengths and interest. Figure 27 condenses this proposed framework in a concept map, integrating the four figures that were developed step-by-step in section 6.1.1.

The fact that different organisations are grouped together in the cross-case analysis in chapter 5 (e.g. regarding their organisational model, structuring of HR work or recruiting processes) confirms that there is no one way to *be* agile. Therefore, developing a cookie-cutter model of how to *do* agile people management would be contradictory. It would present HR practitioners with yet another empty structure, when structure should only be secondary, and the result of

creating value. Instead, the empirically grounded conceptual framework below acts as a visual, condensed version of the insights in the previous section. Its aim is to help organisations understand the connection and need for alignment between core principles, practices and structure, where the former guides to the latter. In doing so, the new conceptual framework closes the loop to the fundamental agile principles set out in chapter 2.1, where values trump processes and tools.

Of course, this triad of principles, practices and structure is not a strictly linear process, but one of constant recalibration: “social practices necessitate organisation structure and function, and vice versa” (Geilinger et al., 2016, p. 319). For example, the principle of self-reliance may be embedded in the practice of portfolio-careers where individuals are expected to curate their own bundle of roles. With an influx of graduates, it might become adamant that many lack ability of driving this process themselves. This might lead to the establishment of an additional role on the organisational level: a personal development coach who guides graduates in this process to autonomy – until needs change again.

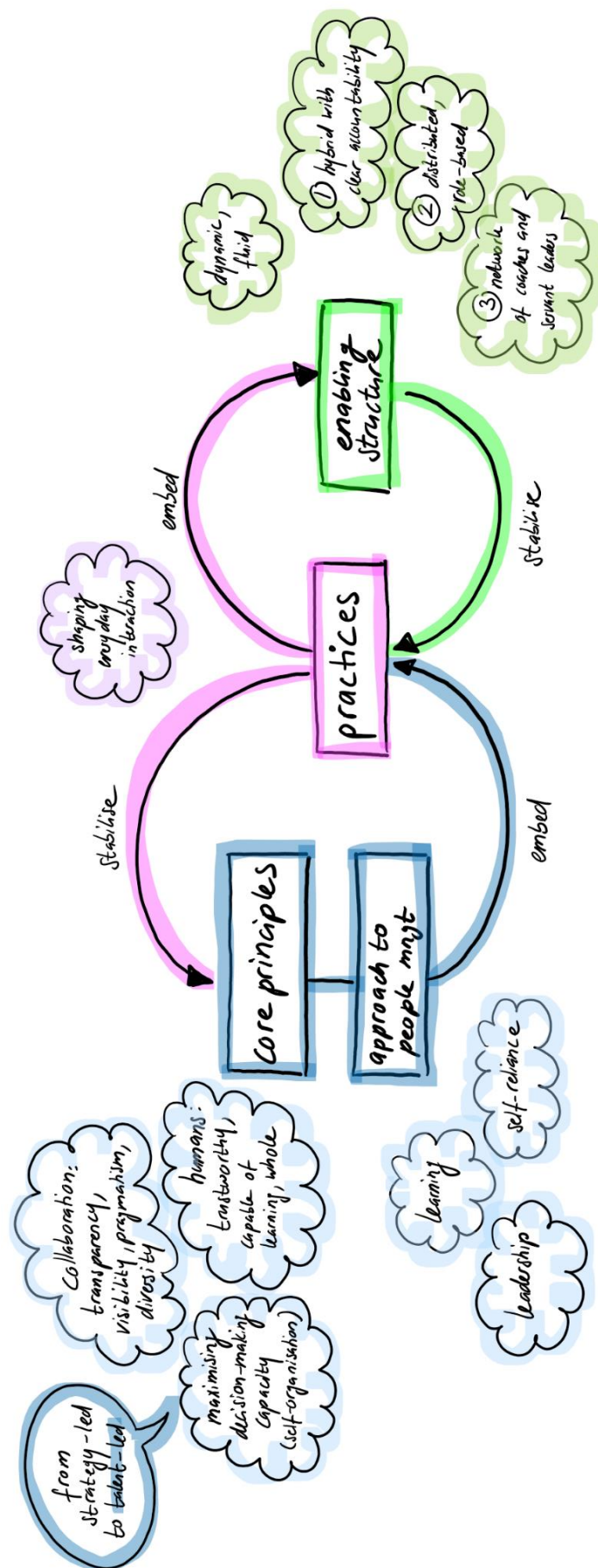


Figure 27 Visualisation of the empirically grounded conceptual framework  
Own figure

## 6.2. Validation

The validity criteria for this whole study were established in section 3.3, as a part of the methodology chapter. As a further demonstration of validity, it can be noted that the new framework in addition successfully addresses two theoretical issues, as epitomised below.

Referring back to the validity approach described in detail in section 3.3, most aspects concern the collection and processing of the interview data that lead to the results presented in chapters 4 and 5, and are therefore not explained further in this section. Having arrived at these results, their validation and translation into an empirically grounded conceptual framework included a triad of actions. While the first step can be considered a part of the *transactional* validity aspects of this research (i.e. methodological rigidity), the other two steps speak for its *transformational* power (i.e. actual impact):

- The **(1) validation of the single-case summary** occurred via individual concept maps (see chapter 4). The positive feedback of the ten case study companies served as an affirmation of the process, as exemplified by the following two quotes: *“the concept map attached looks spot on. We can certainly see ourselves in it and you’ve represented our non-linear organisation in a relatable way – well done! Even we’ve struggled to do that” (Ströer)*. And: *“I like the visualisation a lot, both the content and the form. I totally recognise myself in it. I was quite curious to see whether it still adds up, as we are constantly changing. But in regard to the core of it and the values, it still adds up. That’s a great feeling” (Dot)*<sup>143</sup>. Some recipients also made use of the opportunity to suggest minor changes to their own concept map that were subsequently integrated.
- The **(2) validation of the conceptual framework** via a *condensed summary* (including Figure 27) (see appendices) was equally encouraging, illustrated by the following three quotes: *“we are doing some employer brand work at the moment and feel like there’s information in here that will be really valuable, so that’s a nice benefit for us” (Redvespa)*. Or: *“the framework you put together is excellent” (CerebralFix)*. And: *“you can be proud, the insight summary turned out nicely. I also think the approach is described very nuanced” (Unic)*<sup>144</sup>.
- An experimental **(3) implementation of findings in practice**. The researcher’s own place of employment served as a pilot company for applying early findings of this study. Due to the organisation’s relative maturity in business agility, findings from all four layers of the framework (as expanded on in section 6.1.1) could be trialled. As a result, the following three findings have been successfully implemented, with promising preliminary results: (1) Strengthening the pillars of *learning* and *self-reliance*

<sup>143</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Die Visualisierung gefällt mir sowohl inhaltlich als auch von der Form her sehr, sehr gut. Ich finde mich total wieder. War zunächst gespannt, ob das noch stimmt, weil wir ja tatsächlich so konstant im Veränderungsprozess sind, aber der Kern und die Werte, dass stimmt absolut immer noch. Voll gutes Gefühl.*

<sup>144</sup> Author’s own translation. Original citation: *Stolz kannst du sein, gut geworden der Insight. Ich denke auch des der approach differenziert beschrieben ist.*

by co-designing new settings for individual development and career crafting with employees, for example around self-leadership and boundary management (level *general approach to people management*), (2) applying insights from recruiting (e.g. involving more people, stronger focus on cultural fit and suitability to way of working) (level *practices*) and (3) distributing HR work beyond existing HR roles (i.e. reinforcing a role-based approach), with more employees taking on HR work alongside their roles in the core business (i.e. project management), as well as HR experts taking on project roles to foster networking and mutual understanding (level *enabling structure*).

In addition to meeting the validity criteria illuminated above, the new conceptual framework succeeds in addressing the following two theoretical issues.

*Firstly*, the new conceptual framework (as developed in sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2) fits the requirements of HRM in agile organisations, as summarised in section 2.3. It does so by (1) **being talent-led**, (2) **integrating complexity** instead of omitting it, (3) **emphasising dynamic capabilities** by fostering learning and sharing practices (4) its **foundation on social practices** as an enabler of autonomy.

*Secondly*, the new conceptual framework manages to resolve traditional HRM tensions the *Ulrich model* (see section 2.3) struggles with, as outlined by (Gerpott, 2015, p. 218). The new conceptual framework for agile people management: (1) serves **multiple stakeholder groups** by focusing on both the individual and the collective, (2) cultivates **paradox and ambidextrous leadership**, (3) embraces both **operational and strategic HR work** and (4) decides whether to delegate or **retain HR work depending on the context**. By following these four suggestions, the new conceptual framework integrates tensions instead of trying to outsource or resolve them by spatial separation. In doing so, it acknowledges the challenges of accepting complexity and leaving tensions deliberately unresolved.

By adopting agile people management as a shared social practice, HRM can fulfil the claim that it should find new ways of truly adding value for the whole organisation. Consequently, HRM is no longer alienated from the business, yet at the cost of leaving the idea of being a *profession* behind.

## 7. Conclusion

In section 7.1, this concluding chapter provides a complete overview over how this study combines the still fragmented literature with empirical evidence of emergent practices into an empirically grounded conceptual framework for people management in agile organisations. The following section 7.2 then shows how the new conceptual framework can be incorporated into the existing body of knowledge, as a contribution towards reframing HRM as a shared social practice. This integration points to a variety of potential further research, which is summarised in the closing section 7.3 of this final chapter.



## 7.1. Summary of thesis

This thesis is dedicated to a phenomenon in practice: how agile organisations experiment with new approaches to people management that differ from the current HRM paradigm. This emergent practice, however, is not reflected in theory yet. The introductory chapter 1 explained a lack of academic research on the subject, while the literature review in chapter 2 revealed that this divide between practitioner and academic interest is common in the field of HRM. This research hence set out to contribute towards bridging this gap between practice and theory: with the incentive that agile organisations would benefit from a tailored framework for organising HR work, while simultaneously expanding the body of literature on the matter. The gap addressed in this research therefore concerns *HR for Agile*, the contribution of suitable people management in driving business agility (McMackin & Heffernan, 2020, pp. 1-2). Table 1 in section 1.4 identified two research objectives and two research aims, accordingly. This thesis then set forth to address this gap with the help of a multiple-case study, as explained in chapter 3. In doing so, it was able to meet its research objectives and aims, which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

The rich and in-depth description of the emergent practice in the ten companies selected for the multiple-case study fulfilled the **first research objective** in chapter 4. Chapter 5 then analysed the individual cases and identified common patterns and recurring themes across the emerging practice, fulfilling the **first research aim**. Interpreting and contrasting the emerging practice with the literature review from chapter 2, and in particular the current HR paradigm signified by the *Ulrich model*, chapter 6 fulfils the **second research objective**. The emergent practice clearly showed that *best practice* and over-simplified or restrictive models cannot cope with the complexity and speed of change these organisations are faced with, affirming the need for a new framework. As a common core, their approach seems to be talent-led and focused on dynamic capabilities. It quickly became evident that this approach is founded in an image of people as resourceful, trustworthy and whole – a prerequisite for establishing highly autonomous environments with distributed leadership and decision-making capacity.

The same chapter also synthesises these insights into an empirically grounded and validated conceptual framework for agile people management, meeting the **second research aim**. The new conceptual framework integrates complexity and tensions instead of omitting them, and describes agile people management as a triadic process where **(1a) core principles** and a general **(1b) approach to people management** are embedded in **(2) practices** surrounded by a fluid **(3) enabling structure**. The core of agile people management is the anchoring of principles in everyday interactions, where they act as an enabler of autonomy and reproduce the organisational culture and values. As such, HR work is no longer largely limited to traditional HR functions, but distributed across the organisation, as a shared social practice.

## 7.2. Contribution

Due to selecting information-rich cases, the ten selected organisations all stem from the service sector. The explanatory power of this research can therefore not be simply transferred to contexts other than these knowledge-intensive expert organisations, to organisations exceeding 500 employees or from a different socio-economic background. Because of its exploratory nature and the limited resources available, the ten selected cases can only provide the starting point for an analytical generalisation – especially because of the cross-sectional data collection that only represents a snapshot of reality. Moreover, as interviews were only conducted with individuals with a large decision-making capacity, it might prove fruitful to replicate results with the incorporation of employees with less influence in shaping the approach to people management in these organisations. With this in mind, this thesis is able to make the following *theoretical* and *practical* contributions.

The **theoretical contribution** lies in the advancement of the body of knowledge in HRM as well as organisational development, by reflecting a phenomenon of practice in the wake of the current advancement of post-industrial organisations. Most importantly, this research contributes to closing the gap between practitioner interest and academic endeavours in the field of strategic HRM, as identified in section 1.2. Through offering a perspective on people management as a shared social practice, this study opens up a discourse on the shortcomings of the current HR paradigm (as exemplified by the *Ulrich model*) in addressing the complexity and need for speed these organisations are faced with. Thereby, it contributes to the integration of megatrends affecting many workplaces, such as democratisation, co-creation, digitisation or demographic shifts – and the change in values that go with them (Armutat, 2012, p. 39; Esposito & Tse, 2018, p. 122). Discussions around the future of work also include the viability of employment per se in the wake of globalisation and individualisation (Harney & Collings, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, this thesis strengthens the link between agile management practices and organisational theory, i.e. a view on agile organisations as dynamic, complex, social systems that rely on dynamic capabilities and organisational ambidexterity – furthering the epistemological understanding of agile organisations and their practices.

The **practical contribution** of this research spans beyond the ten case-study organisations that are curious to hear how peers respond to some of the same challenges. Other practitioners are equally likely to benefit from the rich and in-depth description of the emerging practice. Whereas publishing a conceptual model alone would have been rather abstract, the description of the practices across ten organisations manages to fill this framework with life – despite the lack of *best practice* approaches in an agile context. Acknowledging agile people management as a young phenomenon, collecting these snippets of inspiration might provide especially fruitful for other practitioners. Furthermore, this study provides decision-makers with arguments for large-scale transformations and valuable insights of how agile people management can be introduced in whole organisations (Denning, 2016a, p. 16). This aspect may be welcomed in particular by practitioners in SMEs, where experimenting with HR

practices comes at a high price (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 542). Lastly, this study will contribute to a wider discourse in the industry about the need for a new approach to HRM for organisations navigating complex and dynamic environments. While “much of SHRM research is stuck still arguing about and addressing twentieth-century concerns”, the proposed understanding of agile people management as a social practice opens up new opportunities (Wright et al., 2018, p. 142). It means nothing less than the chance of unleashing co-creation, creativity and empowerment for a workforce that thrives on autonomy and independence, and increasingly craves for purpose (Grow & Yang, 2018, p. 19; Kraus, 2017, p. 72).

### 7.3. Implications for further research

This study has started to fill an almost blank canvas, by providing a rich overview over numerous aspects of people management in agile organisations – both from a more theoretical and a hands-on perspective. Natural first steps for further research might include the additional testing of the new conceptual framework in practice, as well as its adaption to other sectors or industries. In addition, a wide range of topics could be chosen in follow-up research and examined more closely. Many of these topics may further contribute to closing the gap between academic and practitioner interest, leaving behind the days where practitioner's widespread adoption of HRM models were “not in line with an evidence-based approach to management” (Gerpott, 2015, p. 217). Topics of particular interest for further research include the tensions of agile people management raised in section 6.1.1. Namely challenges of...

- (1) ...nurturing **resilience** on both an individual and organisational level, including the connection to the **agility-stability paradox** and **ambidexterity**;
- (2) ...fostering **self-reliance**, **self-reflection** and the willingness to take over **responsibility** for one's own roles, including career crafting;
- (3) ...ensuring **visibility** for individual achievements as well as **alternative career models**, inside the organisation, in client interaction and in the labour market;
- (4) ...balancing **individual and collective needs** as an organisation;
- (5) ...establishing a **communication** culture around open and direct communication, including multi-directional, critical and ongoing **feedback**.

Two aspects of agile people management that were present in the emergent practice were not reflected in theory, which might prompt other follow-up research: firstly, the striking emphasis on people as being *whole* and therefore the claim that they should be allowed to be their whole, authentic selves at work. Secondly, the importance of unlearning and embracing failure as a part of individual and organisational learning.

A last research need was voiced by several case study organisations themselves, in the interaction encompassing the interviews. Various research participants mentioned that they strongly believe that implementing their chosen approach to HRM directly translates into economic success – despite having no proof for this hypothesis. Denning (2018, p. 7) expressed a similar claim that “employees think solution before profit. [...] There's an assumption—which has been borne out repeatedly by the marketplace—that excelling at the former will lead naturally to the latter”. Investigating the relationship between monetary success and agile people practices might provide an interesting field for both practitioners and academics, again contributing to closing the divide between them.

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## Appendices

- I Interview guide
- II Framework summary
- (III Coded transcripts available upon request)



A background photograph showing three people in a professional setting. A man with glasses and a dark jacket is smiling and looking towards a woman with blonde hair. Another person is partially visible on the left. They appear to be in a meeting or collaborative work environment.

## Interview Guide

**Agile HR: Emergent practice in agile organizations**  
PhD research project by Léonie S. Mollet



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TE WHARE WĀNAKA O AORAKI

Thank you for  
helping me  
discover agile HR!  
Here's a few  
thoughts...



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# Topic cluster 1: **Guiding principles**

- Describe your guiding principles or core values (as an organization).
- Tell me about your image of the human person (as an organization).



## Topic cluster 2: **Practice** (45' max.)



- Illustrate how these principles are embedded in your practice.
- Take me through the journey of an employee and highlight your core values in action (e.g. recruiting, training and learning, resource allocation, collaboration and cooperation, performance reviews and remuneration, career paths).

## Topic cluster 3: **Motivation**



- Explain whether your approach to people management has changed over time.
- Reveal whether there has been an «aha moment» in choosing your approach.
- Demonstrate the main motivation or driver behind your approach.

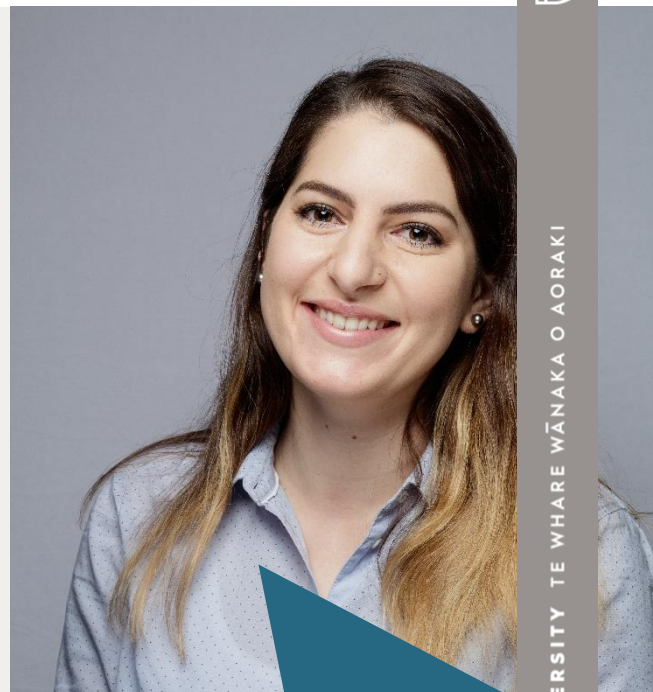
## Topic cluster 4: **Organization**



- Explain who's responsible for people management in your organization.
- Describe how your practices are determined or changed.
- Elaborate on your organizational structure in regards to people management.

## Your interview at a glance (max. 90')

- You're **welcome to bring visuals and documents** to support your examples **or take me on an office tour**.
- Your **interview will be audio-recorded**, so I can transcribe it later and focus on our talk; visuals (if provided) will be photographed.
- With the interview being completed, you have given me **permission to analyze the data**.
- Both the **company and interviewee's name may be used in publications** (incl. quotations). All texts will be made available for cross-check beforehand.



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**Any questions? Get in touch!**



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TE WHARE WĀNAKA O AORAKI

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey jacket, stands in a modern office hallway. She is looking out a large glass window, her hands clasped in front of her. She has a bright yellow backpack with a pattern of small white dots. The hallway has white walls and a blue door on the left. The lighting is soft and even.

# Agile People

Emergent practice in agile organisations: framing HRM as a shared social practice

**There is enormous interest in the emerging practices of HR work and people management in post-industrial organisations.**

This interest, however, is not reflected in theory yet. This exploratory research contributes to bridging the gap between practitioner and academic interest – starting to fill that blank canvas.

This study was conducted with the help of ten knowledge-intensive SME in the service sector, who were willing to share their own approach as first-movers: 4 in Switzerland (Dot, Ergon, Liip, Unic) and 6 in New Zealand (Boost, CerebralFix, Humankind, Redvespa, Snapper, Ströer).

**After a rich and in-depth description of the emergent**



**practice, insights gained  
were synthesised into a  
conceptual framework; this  
is a condensed version of it.**



From this perspective, organisations become ecosystems of talent, where distributed leadership fosters a culture of learning and knowledge-sharing. Organisations go from being strategy-led to being talent-led. The current enabling structure around these principles then becomes secondary.

**In this environment, HR work is distributed across the organisation and becomes a shared social practice that shapes every-day interaction.**

**...and in more detail.**

There is no one way to be agile. Developing a cookie-cutter model of how to do agile people management would be contradictory, and would present practitioners with yet another empty structure. In contrast: **Structure emerges as a result of creating value.**

An organisation's **(1a) core principles** and its general **(1b) approach for HRM and people management** set the foundation for all following decisions. These principles are then embedded in **(2) practices** that are surrounded by an **(3) enabling structure**.

This triad of principles, practices and structure is **not a strictly linear process, but one of constant recalibration**. For example, the principle of self-reliance may be embedded in the practice of portfolio-careers, where individuals are expected to curate their own bundle of roles. With an influx of graduates, it might become adamant that many lack the ability to drive this process themselves. This might lead to the establishment of an additional role on the organisational level: a personal development coach who guides graduates in this process towards autonomy – until needs change again.

## **(1a) Core principles**

**Principles safeguard a sense of coherence across the organisation:** when embedded in practices, they dictate day-to-day interaction and shape the organisational vocabulary. A strong shared understanding of these principles is therefore the prerequisite for alignment and distributed decision-making in highly autonomous environments.

**Most importantly, people are seen as trustworthy and whole individuals.** Without this fundamental belief, creating an environment where these individuals are then granted autonomy would not be possible. Maximising the decision-making capacity within the organisation is a crucial enabler of the speed and ability to change these organisations need. In this network of empowered people, the capacity to learn relies on individuals as the smallest unit of the organisation. The rest of the principles then circles around enablers of such a work environment, such as transparency and visibility, pragmatism or diversity.

## **(1b) Approach to HRM and people management**

The emergent practice clearly shows that customer-focus and people-centricity are not contradictory. While work is organised around the fulfilment of changing customer needs, the organisation itself must serve the needs of its people – and not vice-versa. The goal of HR work in agile organisations is empowering resourceful individuals to collaborate and take over responsibility for their realm of autonomy, according to their skills and interests. The approach to people management is defined by the pillars of **(1) learning, (2) self-reliance and (3) distributed and servant leadership.**

**(1) Learning:** The need for internalising change stems from changing customer needs in dynamic markets. As technology, products and services change, employees' skills need to change with them. In that regard, learning is just as important as unlearning and failure. As trivial as that difference may sound at first glance, it entails enormous consequences for HR work: it demands establishing an error culture where making mistakes is encouraged instead of frowned upon, and where learned behaviour is constantly questioned. This is done mainly by encouraging experimenting and prototyping as a way to quickly learn one's way forward. At the same time, this focus of (un-)learning as a driver of change obviates the need for over-engineered HR programmes: instead, HR work focuses on supporting individuals and groups in a highly contextual and flexible manner.

**(2) Self-reliance:** As a consequence of the empowerment paradigm, responsibility shifts to the individual employee – including being responsible for one's own development. Together with the often role-based approach, this entails a major shift towards non-linear and portfolio careers that are driven by individuals and along their strengths and interests. Personal fulfilment has to be balanced with company needs, and individual learning has to be balanced with collective learning. The shift towards informal and on-the-job learning is a sign of continuous development being closely linked to one's own professional identity. HR work then seeks to support individuals in their continuous learning and career crafting, e.g. through coaching, ad-hoc mentoring or flexible training offerings.

Performance management relies on direct, multi-directional and impact-related feedback in a largely transparent work environment.

**(3) Leadership:** HR work is integrated in leadership in two ways. Firstly, distributed leadership can be contextual and spontaneous, and reflect individuals taking ownership of something they care about. Thus, distributed leadership removes bottlenecks and moves decision-making closer to the subject-matter expertise. Secondly, while traditional line management may no longer add any value to the organisation, leadership skills are still in high demand. Servant leadership supports and coaches individuals in navigating autonomy as opposed to micromanaging them. This kind of leadership also triggers organisational development, by integrating ambidexterity into the system and fostering entrepreneurial thinking across the organisation, instead of delegating it to top management.

**Reframing agile people management as a shared social practice:** HR work is distributed beyond traditional HR roles, and indeed across the whole organisation - embedded in principles, leadership and the collective. Due to its embeddedness in every-day routines and interaction, people management can thus be reframed as a shared social practice. Shared social practices provide a cultural fabric woven throughout the organisation, by which people can enact and reproduce (i.e. stabilise) organisational principles through exercising distributed and ambidextrous leadership.



## (2) Examples of embedding principles in practices

The principles above (i.e. sections 1a and 1b) are embedded in practices that are a part of everyday interaction. This allows alignment with the company's values and purpose despite a highly autonomous environment. Operational work (e.g. administrative work) is integrated as smoothly as possible with a user-centric perspective. In contrast to the controllable environment of traditional bureaucratic organisations, there are no *best practice* approaches available.

**A rich description of practices in all ten organisations serves as illustration and inspiration in the full study.** A quick glance at recruiting practices shall serve as an example of how principles may be integrated. Again, there is no *best practice* for how recruiting is done (e.g. via a dedicated HR or recruiting role, a leadership role or as a collaborative team effort), yet there are a few common features in line with the core principles:

- *Recruiting process often reflects decentralisation and team-orientation.*
- *Tendency to involve as many team members in the process as possible – as they are the ones that need to closely collaborate with the new employee.*



- *Company values and the agile way of working act as main elements of attracting talent.*
- *Cultural fit wins over technical fit, as recruiting is about hiring the "right" instead of the "best" people.*
- *Focus on communication, collaboration and self-reflection skills to check for a candidate's suitability for the organisation's way of working.*
- *Onboarding as a direct link from recruiting to immersing a person in the culture, with a major focus on relationship-building*

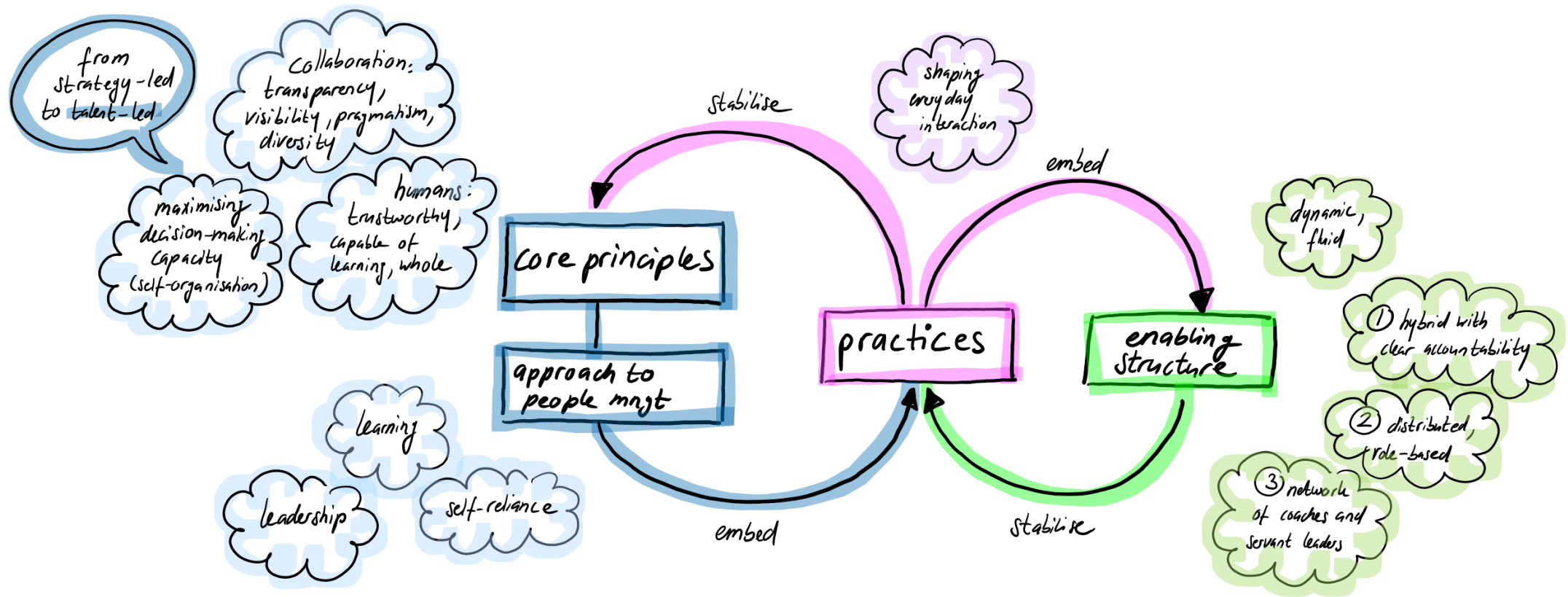
### **(3) Enabling organisational structure**

The organisation wraps around practices as a dynamic and fluid entity that adapts quickly with changing needs. This is why agile organisations are often compared with learning organisations or complex adaptive systems, constantly re-calibrating between alignment and autonomy.

The emergent practice manifested three different ways of organising the sharing of HR work: other approaches are possible as long as they align with the core principles mentioned above.

- **Approach (1) Hybrid structure with clear accountability:** assigning accountability for people management to a single role (that drives continuous improvement), yet shared responsibility for HR work via distributed leadership and including employees in designing practices.
- **Approach (2) Distributed and role-based approach:** following a role-based approach, accountability for both designing people management practices and fulfilling HR work is assigned to a number of different (and dynamic) roles across the organisation.
- **Approach (3) Network of coaches and servant leaders:** all people management aspects are directly integrated into servant leadership, via a network of coaches or as an integral part of leadership roles.

## **A visual summary of the conceptual framework.**



## Tensions and challenges

Despite the many perceived benefits and organisational fit of agile people management, there are a number of challenges it brings in its wake. Many of these challenges present ongoing tensions that need to be continuously acknowledged and do not allow quick solutions.

**(1) Resilience and agility-stability paradox:** Agility touches every layer of the organisation and entails continuous improvement. Individuals may easily feel overwhelmed by the amount of uncertainty and the speed of change, especially if an organisation falls short in providing an ample support structure around individuals to grow their resilience and find their voice. Constantly trading off efficiency against effectiveness can also be extremely challenging.

**(2) Learning how to take over responsibility:** whereas employees are likely to have traditional management systems internalised through school and education, they often have to unlearn how to be micromanaged. Organisations often take this process of unlearning for granted, and presume employees are immediately able to adopt full responsibility. However, this journey towards autonomy and self-reliance might be a lengthy process that requires plenty of tailored support. To simply replace one extreme (i.e. micromanaging) with another (i.e. self-organisation) is neither feasible in practice nor in-line with agile principles.

**(3) Visibility and alternative career paths:** The visibility and compatibility of non-linear career paths pose an ongoing challenge. This includes the need to translate internal roles and portfolio careers to both non-agile clients (e.g. for justifying pricing and experience) and the labour market. The lack of visibility of professional achievements in the traditional sense (e.g. via promotions or validation from line management) adds another dimension.

**(4) Balancing individual and collective needs:** merging different perspectives into a collective identity, or balancing individual and collective needs, are challenges that come with making employees responsible for their own learning. In this environment, creating a shared understanding of the company's purpose and principles can be difficult as well – especially during busy day-to-day life.

**(5) Open communication culture:** establishing a communication culture around critical and transparent feedback can be enormously challenging, albeit being called a prerequisite to a thriving agile organisation.



**Ngā mihi nui ki a koe**

**Thanks for making this research possible!**

Thoughts? Questions? Comments? I am looking forward to hearing from you!

Léonie S. Mollet